

The length of time you can expect most common infections to last is:

- Ear infection: around 4 days
- Sore throat: around 1 week
- Common cold (runny nose): around 1½ weeks
- Sinus infection: around 2½ weeks
- Cough (which often happens after a common cold): around 3 weeks

If your infection lasts longer than this, you should ask your doctor for advice.

## How should I treat my cold, cough or sore throat?

The best way to treat most colds, coughs or sore throats is to drink plenty of fluids and get some rest.

You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen to relieve headache, aches and pains and fever.

Ask your pharmacist for advice about over-the-counter cures such as cough medicines, decongestants or throat pastilles. If you are taking medicines for any other condition you must check with your doctor or pharmacist before you take any over-the-counter remedies.

Most colds can last about two weeks, and may end with a cough and bringing up phlegm. If your cold lasts more than three weeks, if you become breathless or have pain in your chest, or if you already have a chest complaint, you should see your doctor.

## Key things to remember

- Most common infections don't need antibiotics – they get better by themselves
- Taking antibiotics when you don't need them puts your health, and your family's health at risk
- If your doctor decides that you need an antibiotic, make sure you take it exactly as prescribed
- Your pharmacist can advise you on over-the-counter remedies that can help to treat many common infections

## What else can I do to reduce the risk of antibiotic resistance?

Wash your hands with soap and water before you eat and after you use the toilet. Regular hand washing will help keep you healthy and prevent the spread of bacteria.

Ask your doctor if you have all the vaccinations you need to protect yourself from infection. If you have young children, make sure they are up to date with their childhood immunisations.

### Where can I get more information about antibiotics and antibiotic resistance?

HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)  
US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)  
UK Health Protection Agency (HPA) [www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)  
Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics (APUA) [www.tufts.edu/med/apua/](http://www.tufts.edu/med/apua/)



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A Strategy for the Control of  
Antimicrobial Resistance in Ireland



# Get better without Antibiotics





## What are Antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medicines used to treat infections that are caused by bacteria (germs). Antibiotics can't treat infections caused by viruses (such as colds and the flu). Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics if you have an infection caused by a bacteria, for example, pneumonia or a kidney infection.

### Why didn't my doctor prescribe an antibiotic when I wanted one?

If you haven't been offered antibiotics it's because your doctor feels that your infection will clear up on its own. Antibiotics can cause unpleasant side effects such as nausea, sickness or skin rashes.

You should ask your doctor:

- When should I start to feel better and what should I do if I don't start to feel better by then?
- Is there anything I can do to help myself get better?
- When and how should I seek further help?

Taking antibiotics that aren't needed might mean that they won't work when you really need them for a serious infection. If a particular antibiotic is given to a lot of people, or if you take many courses of the same antibiotic, bacteria can change so that the antibiotic does not work against them any more. These bacteria are said to be "resistant" to this antibiotic and are much harder to treat.

### Why should I worry about antibiotic resistance?

Every time you take antibiotics that you don't need you increase the chance that you will get an infection that is caused by bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics.

If you get an infection that can't be treated by antibiotics, your infection can last longer. Instead of getting better, your infection might get worse. You might have to take different medicines or need to be treated in hospital.

At the same time, your family or other people you come in contact with may catch the resistant bacteria from you. These people might also then get infections that are hard to cure.

### So when is it ok for me or my child to take antibiotics?

Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics for infections that are caused by bacteria, such as kidney infection or pneumonia. Antibiotics may be life-saving for infections such as meningitis.

If you or your child needs antibiotics, make sure you take them exactly as prescribed. Your pharmacist will explain how to take the antibiotics, some need to be taken on an empty stomach and some have to be taken with food. Make sure you finish the full course,

to get rid of the bacteria completely. If the course isn't completed, some bacteria may be left in your body and become resistant to antibiotics.

Even if you feel better before the antibiotic course is completed you must finish them. Do not 'save' left over antibiotics for the next time you, your child, or any other family member is sick. Antibiotics should only be taken on the advice of a doctor; medication that is prescribed for you may not be the right medicine for another person.

### When are antibiotics not needed?

Most common infections are caused by viruses. This includes all colds, and most coughs and sore throats. Antibiotics do not work against these infections. Most coughs and colds get better themselves without antibiotics.

As well as putting yourself, or your child, at risk of an infection that can't be treated, taking antibiotics when they are not needed puts you at risk of side effects. About one in five people who take antibiotics develop side effects, such as a rash, upset stomach or diarrhoea.

Don't ask your doctor to give you or your child antibiotics for an infection caused by a virus. Instead, ask your doctor or your pharmacist what you can do to feel better. Your local pharmacist can advise on over the counter medications to relieve the symptoms.

GET BETTER WITHOUT ANTIBIOTICS