

Can Antibiotics Do More Harm Than Good?

Q: Is it bad for me to take antibiotics I don't need?

A: Yes. If you take an antibiotic you don't need:

- You are exposed to the drug's side effects--and none of its benefits.
- These can include: fever, rash, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, headache, and nerve damage.
- It may lead to a drug interaction, where one of your medications could become less effective or cause you to develop new symptoms.
- You increase your risk of developing a resistant infection in the future.

Older people may also have more side effects from medications, and these side effects can cause multiple problems. These are all bad health outcomes you don't want.

Antibiotics are drugs that fight infections caused by bacteria. Although antibiotics have many beneficial effects, their use has created the problem of *antibiotic resistance* – which is the ability of bacteria to resist the effects of an antibiotic. When resistance occurs, bacteria change, survive, and multiply, causing more harm, which can make you sicker. Fighting resistance requires stronger drugs and more health care, which may cause a longer recovery time.

Resistance issues are causing a crisis that the Director of the Centers for Disease Control warns is a “threat to health. If we don't act now, our medicine cabinet will be empty and we won't have the antibiotics we need to save lives.”

As many as half of all the antibiotics prescribed are not needed or are not prescribed appropriately. One common situation is when a urinary tract infection (UTI) is suspected. UTI is caused by bacteria that involves any part of your urinary system including the urethra, bladder, ureters and kidneys. UTI symptoms include:

- a burning feeling, discomfort or pain with urination.
- pain in the lower abdomen or back.

- increase in frequency (needing to “go” more often than usual).
- repeated strong urges to urinate.
- blood in the urine.

These symptoms may or may not be accompanied by fever.

A urine culture test may show bacteria—but that doesn't mean there is a UTI—which requires both finding bacteria in the urine and the presence of specific symptoms listed above. Bacteria can and do live naturally in the bladder without causing pain or symptoms.

In the past, when a urine specimen tested positive for bacteria, people thought it should be treated with antibiotics--even when specific symptoms were not present. The American Geriatric Society now recommends to doctors that they should not prescribe antibiotics for these harmless bacteria unless specific symptoms are present.

Non-specific symptoms, such as confusion, a sudden change in behavior, fatigue, or a fall, may be caused by other factors including: dehydration, medication side effects, poor sleep, inadequate nutrition, constipation, depression, or pain. It is important to consider these possible causes, to prevent missing the real diagnosis.

Here are some questions for your and your loved ones to ask your doctor:

- Why do I need an antibiotic?
- When should I stop taking this medication?

Understanding the risks of using antibiotics when not needed leads to good, safe care. The safest care happens when you partner closely with your medical team, to understand and follow the most current advice.

For more background, go to:
<http://www.macoalition.org/uti-elderly-tools>