

# Antibiotics

## Information for patients

### Overview

Antibiotics are used to treat or prevent some types of bacterial infection. They work by killing bacteria or preventing them from spreading. But they do not work for everything. Many mild bacterial infections get better on their own without using antibiotics. Antibiotics do not work for viral infections such as colds and flu, and most coughs.

Antibiotics are no longer routinely used to treat:

- chest infections
- ear infections in children
- sore throats

When it comes to antibiotics, take your doctor's advice on whether you need them or not. Antibiotic resistance is a big problem; taking antibiotics when you do not need them can mean they will not work for you in the future.

### When antibiotics are needed

Antibiotics may be used to treat bacterial infections that:

- are unlikely to clear up without antibiotics
- could infect others
- could take too long to clear without treatment
- carry a risk of more serious complications

People at a high risk of infection may also be given antibiotics as a precaution, known as antibiotic prophylaxis.

### How to take antibiotics

Take antibiotics as directed on the packet, or the patient information leaflet that comes with the medicine, or as instructed by your GP or pharmacist.

Antibiotics can come as:

- tablets, capsules or a liquid that you drink – these can be used to treat most types of mild to moderate infections in the body
- creams, lotions, sprays and drops – these are often used to treat skin infections and eye or ear infections
- injections – these can be given as an injection or through a drip directly into the blood or muscle, and are used for more serious infections

### Missing a dose of antibiotics

If you forget to take a dose of your antibiotics, check the patient information leaflet that came with your medicine to find out what to do. If you're not sure, speak to a pharmacist or a GP.

In most cases, you can take the dose you missed as soon as you remember and then continue to take your course of antibiotics as normal.

But if it's almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed one.

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## Accidentally taking an extra dose

There's an increased risk of side effects if you take 2 doses closer together than recommended. Accidentally taking 1 extra dose of your antibiotic is unlikely to cause you any serious harm. But it will increase your chances of getting side effects, such as pain in your stomach, diarrhoea, and feeling or being sick.

If you accidentally take more than 1 extra dose of your antibiotic, are worried or you get severe side effects, speak to your GP or call [NHS 111](#) as soon as possible.

## Side effects

As with any medicine, antibiotics can cause side effects. Most antibiotics do not cause problems if they're used properly and serious side effects are rare.

The common side effects include:

- being sick
- feeling sick
- bloating and indigestion
- diarrhoea

Some people may have an [allergic reaction](#) to antibiotics, especially penicillin and another type of antibiotic called cephalosporins.

In very rare cases, this can lead to a [serious allergic reaction \(anaphylaxis\)](#), which is a medical emergency

Call 999 or go to A&E now if:

- you get a skin rash that may include itchy, red, swollen, blistered or peeling skin
- you're wheezing
- you get tightness in the chest or throat
- you have trouble breathing or talking
- your mouth, face, lips, tongue or throat start swelling

You could be having a serious allergic reaction and may need immediate treatment in hospital.

## Antibiotic allergic reaction

Rarely, some people may have an [allergic reaction](#) to antibiotics, especially penicillin and cephalosporins.

In most cases, the allergic reaction is mild to moderate and can take the form of:

- a raised, itchy skin rash (urticaria, or hives)
- coughing
- wheezing
- tightness of the throat, which can cause breathing difficulties

These mild to moderate allergic reactions can usually be successfully treated by taking [antihistamines](#).

But if you're concerned, or your symptoms do not get better with treatment, call your GP for advice. If you cannot contact your GP, call [NHS 111](#).

In rare cases, an antibiotic can cause a severe and potentially life-threatening allergic reaction known as [anaphylaxis](#).

## Considerations and interactions

Some antibiotics are not suitable for people with certain medical problems, or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Tell your healthcare professional if you're pregnant or breastfeeding so they can prescribe the most suitable antibiotic for you.

Only ever take antibiotics prescribed for you, never "borrow" them from a friend or family member. Some antibiotics do not mix well with other medicines, or substances, such as the contraceptive pill and alcohol.

Read the information leaflet that comes with your medicine carefully and discuss any concerns with your pharmacist or GP.

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## Antibiotics to prevent infection

Antibiotics are sometimes given as a precaution to prevent, rather than treat, an infection. This is called antibiotic prophylaxis. Situations where antibiotics are given as a preventive treatment can include:

- if you're having an operation
- after a bite or wound that could get infected
- if you have a health problem that means you're at higher risk of infection, such as if you've had your spleen removed or you're having chemotherapy treatment

## Mixing medicines

Some antibiotics do not mix well with certain medicines and herbal supplements. You may be prescribed a different antibiotic or told to stop taking some medicines or herbal supplements. Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine and tell your doctor if you're taking any medicines or herbal remedies.

## Antibiotic resistance

Antibiotics are no longer routinely used to treat infections.

This is because:

- many infections are caused by viruses, so antibiotics are not effective
- antibiotics are often unlikely to speed up the healing process and can cause side effects
- the more antibiotics are used to treat trivial conditions, the more likely they are to become ineffective for treating more serious conditions

Both the NHS and health organisations across the world are trying to reduce the use of antibiotics, especially for health problems that are not serious.

The biggest worry is that new strains of bacteria may emerge that cannot be treated by any existing antibiotics. For more information visit <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/antibiotics/>

## Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

## Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the Patient Experience Team – Tel: (01323) 417400 Ext: 5860 or by email at: [esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net](mailto:esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net)

## Hand hygiene

The Trust is committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

## Other formats

**If you require any of the Trust leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department.**

**Tel: 01424 755255 Ext: 2620**


After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

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**Further information and advice can be obtained from:**

**NHS 111**  
**NHS Choices online**

 **111**  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

**MTW NHS Trust is committed to making its patient information accessible in a range of languages and formats. If you need this leaflet in another language or format please ask one of your clinical care team or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). We will do our best to arrange this.**

Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

**Telephone:**  01622 224960 or  01892 632953

**Email:** [mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net](mailto:mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net)

**or visit their office** at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: [www.mtw.nhs.uk](http://www.mtw.nhs.uk) or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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