



Calling All Moms and Dads—Antibiotics Aren’t Always the Answer

Incorrect antibiotic use is leading to urgent health threats

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has news for you this cold and flu season: antibiotics don’t touch viruses—never have, never will! And it’s not really news. It’s a long-documented medical fact. Antibiotics can only treat illnesses caused by bacteria. Colds, the flu, most sore throats, bronchitis, and many sinus and ear infections are caused by viruses, not bacteria. If your child has a viral infection, antibiotics won’t help them feel better or get well sooner. In fact, they can even be harmful.

Taking antibiotics when they are not needed is fueling an increase in drug-resistant bacteria, which cause infections that are more difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to cure. Almost all types of bacteria have become less responsive to antibiotic treatment. These “superbugs” can quickly spread to family members, schoolmates and coworkers, and threaten our communities with illnesses that were once easily treatable. Combatting antibiotic resistance is a priority for CDC with estimates of more than 2 million resistant infections occurring annually in the United States alone.

Antibiotics can also lead to side effects, such as diarrhea or an upset stomach. Some side effects can be quite serious, or even life-threatening. Take the case of *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile* or *C. diff*) infections – these are bacterial infections that cause severe diarrhea. In the past, most *C. difficile* infections were connected to a recent hospital stay, but new studies show that children in the general community – without a recent hospital stay – account for as many as 7 out of 10 pediatric *C. difficile* infections. Many children who got sick with *C. difficile* had recently taken a course of antibiotics for a respiratory infection — infections that are usually caused by viruses and therefore not even helped by the antibiotics.

When antibiotics are used for viral infections, your child is not getting the best care. A course of antibiotics won’t fight the virus, help your child feel better, or lead to a quicker recovery. It may even be harmful. If your child is diagnosed with a viral illness, ask what you can do to help him feel more comfortable while his immune system does its work. Suggestions might include drinking plenty of fluids, getting a lot of rest, using over the counter medications (check first to see what’s safe for children), using a cool mist humidifier, or gargling with salt water. Do not ask for antibiotics, though. For more information about the right way to use antibiotics, visit www.cdc.gov/getsmart.

Antibiotics only treat bacterial infections. Viral illnesses cannot be treated with antibiotics. When an antibiotic is not prescribed, ask your healthcare professional for tips on how to relieve symptoms and feel better.

Illness	Usual Cause		Antibiotic Needed
	Viruses	Bacteria	
Cold/Runny Nose	✓		NO
Bronchitis/Chest Cold (in otherwise healthy children and adults)	✓		NO
Whooping Cough		✓	Yes
Flu	✓		NO
Strep Throat		✓	Yes
Sore Throat (except strep)	✓		NO
Fluid in the Middle Ear (otitis media with effusion)	✓		NO
Urinary Tract Infection		✓	Yes