

How to make sure antibiotics are the right choice

Sometimes when your child is sick, they will need an antibiotic to get better. Most often, your child will get better just as quickly with or without antibiotics. It's important to know when your child might need an antibiotic.

What is an infection?

Infections are caused by germs. They are often found on the things we touch and can be passed from others if the germs come into contact with our nose, mouth or eyes. Two common types of germs are viruses and bacteria:

- Infections most commonly caused by **viruses** include colds and influenza (flu), and some ear infections.
- Infections caused by **bacteria** include strep throat, bladder and skin infections, and some ear infections.

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are drugs that doctors prescribe to kill infections caused by bacteria. **They do not kill viruses.** An antibiotic will not help your child get better if they have a virus.

Antivirals are drugs that doctors prescribe to treat some serious infections from viruses such as influenza or chickenpox.

How do antibiotics work?

Antibiotics kill bacteria or stop them from growing and reproducing. There are many different kinds of antibiotics. If your child needs an antibiotic, your doctor will choose the one that's right for that specific infection.

Some bacteria have become “resistant” to antibiotics. This means the bacteria has changed in a way that makes it more difficult for the drug to cure or prevent the infection. When an infection can’t be treated with the usual antibiotics, sometimes another antibiotic that has not been studied as much, that may have more side effects, and/or that must be given by intravenous (administered into a vein) has to be used.

Why have bacteria become resistant to antibiotics?

Bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics when the drugs are used too often.

How can you use antibiotics wisely?

- Children should only receive an antibiotic to treat an infection that is caused by bacteria. Colds are caused by viruses, and should not be treated with antibiotics. It’s okay to ask your doctor if they think your child’s infection was caused by a virus or bacteria and if an antibiotic is necessary. If your child has the flu, ask if an antiviral agent would help.
- When your child is sick, it’s best to see their own doctor. That way, a record of all their medication use will be in one place. Avoid going to different walk-in clinics if you can.
- If your child is prescribed antibiotics, be sure to follow the instructions. Discuss the amount of time your child should take it because some types of infections can be treated for shorter time periods.
- Never use antibiotics prescribed for someone else.
- Never use antibiotics left over from a previous illness. If you have unused antibiotics in your home, you should bring them to the pharmacy for safe disposal.
- Make sure your child is immunized. Immunizations, such as the pneumococcal vaccine, help prevent some of the illnesses that antibiotics are used to treat. Vaccines can also prevent many serious viruses, like chickenpox and influenza.

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Infectious Diseases and Immunization Committee
-
-

Last updated: January 2022



© 2022 – Canadian Paediatric Society
cps.ca/en/ – info@cps.ca

Available at www.caringforkids.cps.ca