

# Tips for treating colds, the flu, and sore throats

Here are some things you should know about colds, the flu, and most sore throats.

**Colds, the flu and most sore throats do not require antibiotics.<sup>1</sup>**

**Antibiotics do not kill viruses, they kill bacteria.** Viruses cause colds, the flu, and most sore throats. *Antibiotics do not work against viruses.* Antibiotics do work against infections caused by bacteria, such as the bacteria that cause strep throat. In most cases of a cold or the flu, bed rest, plenty of fluids, and over-the-counter cold or flu medicine may help relieve your symptoms. Your doctor or other healthcare professional may use a throat culture or rapid strep test to find out if you have a bacterial infection that needs antibiotics.

**How do I know if I may need an antibiotic?**

**Up to 50% of antibiotic prescriptions filled outside of hospitals are believed to be unnecessary.<sup>2</sup>** First tell your doctor about your symptoms. He or she will decide if an antibiotic will help you. If you have a cold or the flu, taking an antibiotic will<sup>3</sup>:

- Not cure the infection or help you feel better
- Not keep you from spreading your cold or flu to others
- Not prevent you from catching someone else's cold or flu
- Expose you to possible drug side effects that are unnecessary

*Taking antibiotics when you do not need them can cause bacteria to become resistant to antibiotics. Then, antibiotics might not work when you do need them.*

**A couple of easy steps can help you avoid getting the cold or flu.**

**Most viruses are spread by droplets in the air that come from infected people when they sneeze or cough.** They can also be spread by hand-to-hand contact. Try to avoid close contact with people who have a cold or the flu and remember to wash your hands often. To help prevent the flu, yearly flu shots may be helpful. Ask your doctor about the flu shot if you<sup>4</sup>:

- Are over the age of 50, or under the age of 50 but have a certain medical illness
- Are a woman who is in or past her 14th week of pregnancy
- Work in healthcare

**Three safety reminders if you do require an antibiotic:**

1. Take an antibiotic exactly and for as long as the doctor tells you.
2. Do not save some of your antibiotic for the next time you get sick.
3. Do not take an antibiotic that is prescribed for someone else.

**Your good health is important. If you have questions about your illness or the medication you're taking, please talk to your doctor.**

#### Reference:

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3. A new threat to your health: Antibiotic Resistance. Warning: Unnecessary antibiotics can be harmful. *American Society for Microbiology*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/antibioticresistance/tools.htm>.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Vaccine information. Influenza Vaccine. <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/flu/fluvac.htm>

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