

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

ANTIBIOTICS: WHEN ARE THEY NEEDED?**OVERVIEW**

When you feel sick, you want to feel better fast. But antibiotics aren't always the answer.

Most illnesses are caused by bacteria or viruses. Antibiotics can cure bacterial infections but not viral infections.

- Viruses cause the common cold, most coughs and sore throats, and the flu. Sinusitis usually starts off as a viral infection and may turn into a bacterial infection after 1-2 weeks.
- Bacteria are responsible for strep throat and some forms of pneumonia.

If you have a viral illness, antibiotics

- *Will not cure the infection.*
- *Will not help you feel better.*
- *Will not keep others from catching your illness.*
- *Will not keep you from getting a bacterial infection.*

DOES GREEN OR YELLOW MUCUS MEAN THAT I NEED AN ANTIBIOTIC?

No. Contrary to popular belief, green or yellow mucus does not mean that you have a bacterial infection. It is normal for mucus to thicken and change color during a viral illness or cold.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY INFECTION IS VIRAL OR BACTERIAL?

- There is no easy way for you to know if your infection is viral or bacterial because both types of infections can share common characteristics, like high fever, fatigue, and colored mucus.
- The best course of action is to make an appointment with your healthcare provider and follow their advice for treatment.

CAN ANTIBIOTICS BE HARMFUL?

Yes! Using antibiotics when they are not needed can be harmful to your health and the public at large. Unnecessary exposure to antibiotics helps bacteria develop sneaky ways to outsmart antibiotics, making them stronger and more resistant to treatment. The result is an increased risk of severe and potentially life-threatening infections.

SO HOW DO I TREAT A VIRAL INFECTION?

Antibiotics should not be used to treat the common cold. Other medications can be used to decrease cold symptoms while your body fights off the illness on its own. Talk to your medical provider about effective options. More information is also available in Student Health's "Upper Respiratory Infections" Fact Sheet.

IF I FEEL BETTER, CAN I STOP THE ANTIBIOTIC?

No. If you are prescribed an antibiotic for a bacterial infection, it is very important to take all the medication!

- Only taking part of the prescription means that the infection was not completely treated.
- Not finishing the medication can also lead to the development of resistant bacteria.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITE:

- www.cdc.gov/getsmart