

Taking antibiotics for colds and flu? There's no point.



**Colds and flu are caused by
a virus and antibiotics do
not work on viruses.**



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

talk to your GP or pharmacist or visit www.hse.ie

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medicines used to treat infections caused by bacteria. Antibiotics don't work against infections caused by viruses, such as colds and flu. So there's no point taking antibiotics to treat a cold or flu, and no point asking your doctor to prescribe them for a cold or flu.

Taking antibiotics when you don't need them, like for a cold or flu, is a waste. It can also mean that they won't work when you really need them for a serious infection. This is called antibiotic resistance and it happens when bacteria are exposed to antibiotics and learn to resist them. Taking antibiotics when they are not needed also puts you at risk of side effects, like a rash, upset stomach or diarrhoea.

When are antibiotics not needed?

Most common infections are caused by viruses. Antibiotics do not work against viruses. Most viral illnesses get better themselves without antibiotics. The table below helps you to know when you're likely to need an antibiotic - and when you aren't.

Common Cause: Virus	Common Cause: Bacteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Head cold, runny nose, cough• Sore throat, sinusitis• Ear infections in children• Vomiting and diarrhoea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urine / kidney infections• Persisting cough, cough in people with chest problems, high fever or very unwell• Skin infections e.g. cellulitis• Meningitis
Antibiotics rarely needed	Antibiotics may be needed

When is it OK for me or my child to take antibiotics?

Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics for infections that are caused by bacteria, like some chest infections, kidney infections, some ear infections and meningitis.

If you or your child needs antibiotics, make sure you take them exactly as prescribed. If the course isn't completed, some bacteria may be left in your body and become resistant to antibiotics. Never keep or re-use left over antibiotics for the next time you, your child, or any other family member is sick.

Why didn't my doctor prescribe an antibiotic?

It is because your infection is likely caused by a virus and it's safer to let it clear up on its own. Remember, antibiotics are no use against a virus. The length of time you can expect most common infections to last is:

Ear infections: around 4 days

Sore throat: around 1 week

Common cold (runny nose): around 1½ weeks

Sinus infections: around 2½ weeks

Cough (which often happens after a common cold):
around 3 weeks

If your illness lasts longer than this, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist:

When should I start to feel better?

What should I do if I don't start to feel better by then?

Is there anything I can do to help myself get better?

When and how should I seek further help?

How should I treat a cold, cough or sore throat?

The best way to treat most colds, coughs or sore throats is to drink plenty of fluids and get some rest. Ask your pharmacist for advice about over-the-counter remedies, and read the table overleaf for information on how to treat some common symptoms.

Symptoms	Treatment
Runny nose, blocked nose or congestion	Nasal decongestant spray, oral decongestant syrup or tablets. Menthol & eucalyptus oil preparations.
Sore throat	Honey & lemon, anaesthetic lozenges. Paracetamol or ibuprofen.
Cough in an adult	Antitussive for dry cough - to stop you coughing. Mucolytic or expectorant for chesty cough - to help you break up mucus.
Fever, pain, joint or muscle aches	Paracetamol or ibuprofen.
Cough in a child	Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist.

If you are taking medicines for any other conditions, you must check with your doctor or pharmacist before you take any over-the-counter remedies.

Key things to remember

- Most common infections get better by themselves – without antibiotics
- Taking antibiotics when you don't need them can put your health, and the health of your family, at risk
- If your doctor decides that you need an antibiotic, be sure you take it exactly as prescribed
- Your pharmacist can advise you on over-the-counter remedies that can help to treat many common infections

For more information, visit [hse.ie/antibiotics](https://www.hse.ie/antibiotics)