

Antibiotic Resistance

What is it?

Antibiotic resistance is a worldwide public health problem that continues to grow. It occurs when strains of bacteria in the human body become resistant to antibiotics due to improper use and abuse of antibiotics.

How many people does it affect?

In hospitals, 190 million doses of antibiotics are administered each day. Among non-hospitalized patients, more than 133 million courses of antibiotics are prescribed by doctors each year. It is estimated that 50 percent of these latter prescriptions are unnecessary since they are being prescribed for colds, coughs and other viral infections.

Common causes

Many individuals either expect or ask their physicians to prescribe antibiotics when they feel sick or have a common cold. Patients should understand, though, that antibiotics are intended to treat bacterial infections, not viral infections. And many times a common cold is a viral infection.

The only true way to know if your cold or sickness is a bacterial infection and whether it should be treated with antibiotics is for your physician to test it. If you have a sore throat your physician should take a throat culture test. If the the test results indicate that a bacterial infection is present, then antibiotics should be prescribed to treat the infection. There is no sure way of knowing whether a cold or sickness is a bacterial infection without a test.

The improper use and abuse of antibiotics has led to the development of antibiotic resistance. The most common misuse and abuse of antibiotics are:

Physicians prescribing antibiotics for viral infections

Not finishing the full dosage of the antibiotic. When an antibiotic prescription is not finished (even leaving one or two pills), it leaves some bacteria alive and "resistant" to future antibiotic treatment.

How can it be prevented?

Both physicians and patients have a role to play in decreasing the misuse of antibiotics.

Antibiotics should only be prescribed when a test (such as a throat culture) shows that there is a bacterial infection present. Antibiotics are not effective in fighting a viral infection. Even so, patients often demand that their physicians prescribe antibiotics when they are not needed.

Taking antibiotics when you have a viral infection not only wastes your time and money, but also contributes to increasing antibiotic resistance.

Patients should ask their doctor if they have a viral or bacterial infection and which tests have been done to prove this. Physicians too, must change their prescribing practices and only prescribe antibiotics for their patients when a bacterial infection is present.

Downloadable Brochures

Download a printable [brochure](#) containing the information on this page.

Download a [brochure](#) from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) titled *Preserve A Treasure: Know When Antibiotics Work*.

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