

## Using antibiotics wisely

Many parents expect the doctor to prescribe antibiotics for a child's cold or ear infection. But doctors everywhere are trying to prescribe antibiotics only when they are really needed. They've learned that unnecessary use can lead to new bacteria that are stronger than the antibiotics we have available to kill them. Also, antibiotics sometimes cause allergic reactions and side effects. There's no good reason to expose your child to these risks unless you have to.

### When to skip antibiotics

Most of the time, your child does not need an antibiotic for colds. Here's why:

- Most colds are caused by viruses.
- When your child has a viral infection, taking antibiotics won't help. Antibiotics don't kill viruses. They kill only bacteria.
- Your child's cold symptoms—cough, runny or stuffy nose, and sore throat—will probably go away without an antibiotic in about 1 week.

### When are antibiotics needed?

#### *Sore throats*

- Some sore throats are caused by bacterial infections. If your doctor thinks your son or daughter has strep throat, your child may need to take an antibiotic.
- Before prescribing an antibiotic for strep throat, your doctor may examine your child, do a rapid strep test or throat culture, and ask if anyone else at home has recently had strep throat.
- The antibiotic isn't given to treat the sore throat. That will go away by itself. Doctors prescribe antibiotics for strep throat to prevent more serious consequences, such as rheumatic fever.

#### *Ear infections*

- Some ear infections are also caused by bacteria. Most of the time, your child's natural defenses are strong enough to fight the infection without the help of antibiotics.
- Ear infections rarely lead to more serious problems, so more often than not, antibiotic treatment isn't needed.
- Today, many doctors prescribe antibiotics for an ear infection only when a child has a fever or has already had several ear infections in the past year.

### When your child has a cold

Although antibiotics won't help a cold, there are some things you can do to help your child feel better.

- Be sure she gets plenty of rest and drinks lots of liquids.
- Use a humidifier or take him into a hot steamy bathroom. The moist air helps dilute the mucus so your child can breathe easier. Saline nose drops might also help.
- Use pillows to prop your child's head up while sleeping. Do this only for older children, not infants.
- Give your child warm salt water to gargle with. This can help ease a sore throat.
- Don't smoke. Children who live with smokers are more likely to have ear infections that need antibiotic treatment.
- Ask your doctor if you can give your child a pain reliever or decongestant.
- If your child doesn't feel better or gets worse, call your doctor for advice.

### NOTES

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