

# Get better without using antibiotics

This leaflet explains the need to get the right treatment for common illnesses such as colds and coughs without encouraging antibiotic resistance.

## How should I treat my cold?

The best way to treat most colds, coughs or sore throats is to drink plenty of fluids and to rest. Colds can last about two weeks and may end with a cough and bringing up phlegm. There are many over the counter remedies to ease the symptoms – paracetamol, for example. Ask your pharmacist for advice. If the cold lasts more than three weeks, or you become breathless or have chest pains, or already have a chest complaint, see your doctor.

## What about my children, they're always getting coughs and colds?

It's very common for children to get coughs and colds, especially when they go to school and mix with other children. Ask your pharmacist for advice. If the symptoms persist and you are concerned, see your doctor but you shouldn't expect to be prescribed antibiotics.

## Why should antibiotics not be used to treat coughs and colds?

All colds and most coughs and sore throats are caused by viruses. Antibiotics do not work against infections, such as colds, caused by viruses. Viral infections are much more common than bacterial infections.

## What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are important medicines used to treat infections caused by bacteria. Bacteria can adapt and find ways to survive the effects of an antibiotic. They become 'antibiotic resistant' so that the antibiotic no longer works. The more often we use an antibiotic, the more likely it is that bacteria will become resistant to it. Some bacteria that cause infections in hospitals, such as MRSA, are resistant to several antibiotics.

## Why can't different antibiotics be used instead?

They can, but they may not be as effective, and they may have more side-effects. And eventually the bacteria will become resistant to them too. We cannot be sure we will always be able to find new antibiotics to replace the old ones. In recent years fewer new antibiotics have been discovered.

## How can antibiotic resistance be avoided?

By using antibiotics less often we can slow down the development of resistance. It's not possible to stop it completely, but slowing it down stops resistance spreading and buys some time to develop new types of antibiotics.

## What can I do about antibiotic resistance?

By only using antibiotics when it's appropriate to do so. We now know that most coughs and colds get better just as quickly without antibiotics. When they are prescribed, the complete course should be taken in order to get rid of the bacteria completely. If the course isn't completed, some bacteria may be left to develop resistance.

## So when will I be prescribed antibiotics?

Your doctor will only prescribe antibiotics when you need them, for example for a kidney infection or pneumonia. Antibiotics may be life-saving for infections such as meningitis. By not using them unnecessarily, they are more likely to work when we need them.

Further information can be found on the following website:  
[www.nhs.uk/antibiotics](http://www.nhs.uk/antibiotics)