

ANTIBIOTICS – WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



Photo: © Visionär / Fotolia

DEAR READER,

Antibiotics are important medicines. They are effective against infections triggered by bacteria. They are very helpful in treating many illnesses but are not suitable or needed to treat every infection.

This patient information leaflet explains how antibiotics work and what you should bear in mind when taking them.

At a glance: Antibiotics

- Antibiotics only help to treat illnesses that are caused by bacteria. In this case they can alleviate symptoms and save lives.
- Antibiotics are **not** effective against illnesses caused by viruses. For instance, viruses trigger most common colds, Covid-19, flu or measles.
- Possible side-effects are gastrointestinal problems, fungal infections or skin rashes.
- If your doctor prescribes an antibiotic, then you should take it as indicated.
- To protect yourself from infections, you should above all wash your hands regularly and follow personal hygiene rules.

▶ HOW DO ANTIBIOTICS ACT?

Antibiotics help the body's defence system combat pathogenic bacteria. This is necessary when bacteria have invaded the body and started multiplying. They can trigger an infection and damage organs. Some antibiotics kill the bacteria, others prevent them from multiplying.

Antibiotics do not act only against pathogenic germs but also against useful bacteria that live on our skin and our mucous membranes. Basically, antibiotics should be used as often as necessary and as rarely as possible.

▶ WHEN ARE ANTIBIOTICS EFFECTIVE?

Most infections are caused by bacteria or viruses. These germs cause different illnesses. However, at the beginning it is not always easy to distinguish between a bacterial and a viral infection. The symptoms may be similar.

Bacteria are always the cause of for example:

- Scarlet fever
- Tick-borne Lyme disease
- Gonorrhoea

Bacteria are frequently the cause of for instance:

- Tonsillitis (*white flecks of pus*)
- Pneumonia
- Cystitis
- Purulent skin infections
- Meningitis

The use of antibiotics may make sense and even be essential when it comes to treating bacterial illnesses.

▶ WHEN ARE ANTIBIOTICS USELESS?

Antibiotics are not effective against viruses. Here are some examples of illnesses that may be caused by viruses:

- Most common colds with symptoms such as a runny nose, a sore throat or a high temperature
- Flu (*influenza*) or Covid-19
- Many forms of bowel inflammation (diarrhoea)
- Measles

Antibiotics are no help whatsoever when it comes to combating these viral illnesses.

▶ SIDE-EFFECTS OF ANTIBIOTICS

Most antibiotics are deemed to be safe and well-tolerated medicines. However, they can still have side-effects. Some examples of side-effects are:

- Gastrointestinal disorders such as diarrhoea, abdominal pain and nausea
- Fungal infections in the mouth, throat or genital area
- Allergic skin reactions like reddening and itching

▶ BEFORE YOU TAKE ANTIBIOTICS

Before you take an antibiotic, you should be well informed about the treatment. Ask your doctor or your pharmacist:

- Why do I need to take an antibiotic?
- What are the possible side-effects?
- For how many days must I take the antibiotic?
- How many times a day should I take it?
- What should I do I have forgotten to take one of the prescribed doses?
- Can I take the antibiotic during a meal or should I wait a while before or after eating?
- Does the antibiotic affect other medicines I'm taking?

Tell your doctor if you are pregnant or breastfeeding before you start taking an antibiotic. As well, be sure to tell your doctor if you did ever not tolerate a certain antibiotic well.

▶ WHY BE CAREFUL WITH ANTIBIOTICS?

The more frequently antibiotics are prescribed and taken, the higher the risk of resistant bacteria developing and spreading. More information about this can be found in other information leaflets: see box below.

▶ WHAT ELSE YOU CAN DO

- Take your antibiotic as prescribed. That means: keep to the prescribed times for taking it. Keep taking the treatment even if you feel better.
- Do not take any antibiotics prescribed for someone else. Do not give your antibiotic to anyone else either.
- Some beverages, for instance milk, alter the action of certain antibiotics. It is, therefore, preferable to take your antibiotic with water.
- Important for women who are on the pill: An antibiotic can impair the action of the pill. For that reason, use non-hormonal contraception in addition, for instance condoms.
- It may be helpful to note down the name, dose, time and any side-effects of all the antibiotics which you or your child have taken.
- Do not expect you or your child to be prescribed an antibiotic every time you get an infection. Even in the case of many common colds caused by bacteria, it may be sufficient initially to simply rest and wait and see.
- The best thing is to avoid an infection. For instance, with good personal hygiene, vaccinations and a full face mask, you can protect yourself and others.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and links

This information is based on the latest scientific research findings and recommendations for patients from patients.

Methodology and sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/antibiotikabehandlung#methodik

Information leaflets "Antibiotics – Resistance" and "Multi-Resistant Organisms": www.patienten-information.de

The German original version is by 2020.

Responsible for the content:
German Agency for Quality in Medicine (ÄZQ)
Joint institution of BÄK and KBV
Fax: 030 4005-2555
E-mail: patienteninformation@azq.de
www.patienten-information.de
www.azq.de



With the compliments of