

Don't Use Antibiotics for Colds and Flu

Antibiotics are grossly overused in Ireland. This is a major cause of the rise of resistant strains of bacteria including superbugs such as MRSA and previously eradicated tuberculosis. Antibiotics should only be prescribed for confirmed and severe bacterial infections. They should not be prescribed for viral infections which are the cause of over 80% of colds and flus. According to a 2009 report on health care associated infection by the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, Ireland is one of only three countries in Ireland where antibiotic use is increasing. Unlike other countries, there is no clear policy to limit antibiotic prescribing to when it is actually needed. This has resulted in Ireland having higher antibiotic resistance than other countries and is a ticking time bomb.

HSE Antibiotic awareness campaign

The HSE has recently launched a new campaign with the key message that "Antibiotics are wasted on colds and flu". By taking antibiotics when they aren't needed means that they will not work when you really need them for a serious infection. Taking antibiotics for a viral illness, such as a cold or flu, is of no benefit to you and is a waste of a precious life saving resource. If antibiotics are taken when they are not needed, it enables bacteria to become resistant to antibiotics. The bacteria are no longer killed by the antibiotics and this leads to more serious infections. This means that antibiotics may not work for infections when you really need them such as serious blood infections and pneumonia. The bacteria are developing resistance faster than the pharmaceutical industry can develop new antibiotics. The world is fast running out of antibiotics.

No need to see a doctor for colds and flu

Seeing a doctor when you have a cold or flu is a waste of your money on GP fees and prescription fees and, in the case of medical card holders, a waste of taxpayers' money. It is also a waste of your time to visit a GP for a cold or flu as you must take time off work, travel to the GP surgery and pharmacy. It is also a waste of time for the GP who doesn't need to see patients with colds and flu. GPs surgeries are being unnecessarily blocked up in Ireland with people visiting them for cold and flus and it reduces accessibility for people who have genuine reasons to see the GP. In many cases, especially at this time of year, people have to wait days to see their GP because of unnecessary visits by people with cold and flu.

What the experts say?

Dr. Fidelma Fitzpatrick, Consultant Microbiologist and HSE Clinical Head for the Prevention of Healthcare-associated Infection recently commented in response to the HSE's antibiotic awareness campaign that "Antibiotics have revolutionised the way we treat patients with bacterial infections and have saved many lives since their introduction in the middle of the last century. However antibiotics are sometimes taken unnecessarily for infections such as colds and flu where they have absolutely no benefit for the individual. Using antibiotics when we don't really need them leads to the person building up a resistance to antibiotics: when they really need an antibiotic for a serious illness, an antibiotic may not work. We are using more and more antibiotics each year in Ireland and are seeing more infections caused by antibiotic resistant bacteria (such as *S. pneumonia* a cause of pneumonia and meningitis) or infections due to antibiotics (such as *Clostridium difficile* infection) as a result. We need to wage a war on the growing resistance to antibiotics, otherwise we will be back to an era where people become gravely ill or die because we have run out of effective antibiotics. If we don't take action now, we risk wasting one of the most important medical advances of the past 100 years."

Key points to remember

Antibiotics will not speed up your recovery or make you feel better if you have a viral illness. Most common infections such as common colds, coughs or flu don't need antibiotics, they get better by themselves. Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections and can be lifesaving in certain infections such as meningitis, pneumonia and TB. We need to keep antibiotics for when we really need them. Taking antibiotics when they are not needed causes bacteria to become resistant to antibiotic treatments. So when antibiotics are needed in the future they will not work. Antibiotics can cause side effects such as diarrhoea, nausea and skin rashes. About one in five people taking antibiotics get side effects. Taking antibiotics when they are not needed puts your health at risk.

What to do if you have cold or flu

Many infections are viral so an antibiotic should **not** be prescribed and you should take the following advice:

- Stay at home and rest if necessary
- Drink plenty of water or soft drinks
- Take paracetamol to reduce your temperature, if feverish or if you are in any discomfort
- You may wish to take other remedies, but be aware that they may contain paracetamol - do not exceed the maximum daily dose of paracetamol by combining different products - ask your pharmacist
- Ask your pharmacist about other remedies you can safely take to relieve your symptoms
- If you are concerned that your symptoms are getting worse or you are not better in a few days, phone the surgery for further advice.

What to do if you have a cough?

Antibiotics are rarely needed for coughs as most are caused by viruses. A cough is a sign your body is clearing an infection and is normal. There are certain suggestions I will make to relieve the cough and clear it quicker. Steam inhalations can be very useful, particularly in productive (chesty) coughs. Simply putting hot steaming water (not boiling) in a basin, putting a towel over your head and inhaling the steam can accelerate the clearing of catarrh. The steam helps to liquefy lung secretions and the warm, moist air is comforting.

Chesty cough mixtures such as Whelehans Special Cough Mixture contain an expectorant which liquefy the catarrh so it can be coughed up easier. Whelehans Special mixture has a 100 years of tradition and is non drowsy. There are other cough mixtures that cause drowsiness which can be used at night to help you sleep. Sugar free versions of cough mixtures are available for diabetics. Dry cough mixtures contain ingredients such as pholcodeine, codeine and dextromethorphan and are useful where there is no mucus to clear. Dry cough mixtures come in drowsy or non drowsy versions. There are also cough mixtures available which contain decongestants which are effective if you have a congested head as well as a cough.

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