



Antibiotics

This leaflet gives you information about antibiotics, how to take them and the possible side effects that they may cause.

Why is careful use antibiotics so important?

Antibiotics are a vital part of healthcare and have been used for many years to treat bacterial infections, e.g. pneumonia or urinary tract infections. However, antibiotics do not work when treating infections or illnesses that are caused by viruses, for example, colds, flu or runny nose. Remember, most viral infections will get better on their own.

The unnecessary use of antibiotics can cause some bacteria to become resistant, known as antimicrobial resistance or AMR. This means the antibiotics are no longer effective and this can lead to more serious infections and complications. Allowing antibiotic resistance to develop is a serious public health threat because resistant bacteria may spread in a community.

What are antibiotics used for?

Antibiotics are used to treat infections caused by **bacteria**. They work by preventing their growth or by killing them. They do not work on viruses.

What is the right way to take antibiotics?

Generally, antibiotics are only available on prescription from a registered healthcare professional, such as a doctor, dentist, nurse or pharmacist. **You should never buy antibiotics online and only take them on medical advice.** Only a trained healthcare professional can make the correct diagnosis and decide whether your condition needs antibiotic treatment. When taking antibiotics, it is important to follow the dosage instructions and always finish the prescribed course. Never misuse them by sharing them with anyone else, or save them for later use.

Why might taking antibiotics lead to resistance?

The misuse of antibiotics is one of the reasons why antibiotics lose their effectiveness and bacteria become resistant to antibiotics.

It is important to remember that is it not YOU who is resistant to the antibiotics, but the bacteria are able to defeat the antibiotics designed to kill them.

What are the side effects of taking antibiotics?

Common side effects include:

Get immediate help if you experience:

- Severe and life-threatening allergic reactions, such as hives (red, raised, itchy bumps or welts on the skin, wheezing, shortness of breath or feel like your throat is closing or choking.

- Severe diarrhoea – it could be a symptom of a *Clostridioides difficile* infection (C. diff)*.
Contact your GP for advice if diarrhoea continues after you have finished the course of antibiotics.

Also refer to the specific antibiotic information leaflet that is included in the packet for the full list of possible side effects.

What can I do to help?

- Staying healthy can help to avoid the need for antibiotics!
- Clean your hands by washing with soap and water for 20 seconds or use a hand sanitiser.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow.
- Get recommended vaccines, such as the flu or COVID vaccine. These can easily be arranged at your GP practice or some local pharmacies.

A world without antibiotics

It is important to look after our precious resource of antibiotics. If we don't use antibiotics wisely, we may see a future where many routine treatments and surgery will become increasingly dangerous. Routine operations, such as hip replacements, and cancer treatment i.e. chemotherapy, all rely on antibiotics to work.

Please remember:

- Antibiotics won't work on a cold or the flu.
- Keep antibiotics working; only take them when your healthcare professional advises you to.
- Follow your health professional's advice on when and how to take antibiotics.
- Never use 'leftover' antibiotics; take them to any pharmacy for safe disposal.

Keeping antibiotics effective is everybody's responsibility.

Contacting us

If you have any further questions or need advice about your treatment, please contact the Royal Berkshire Hospital Switchboard via 0118 322 5111 and provide the name of the unit / team responsible for your treatment.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Written by: N Mahal, Specialist Antimicrobial Pharmacist
RBFT Pharmacy, September 2025. Next review due: September 2027.