
Navigating colds, flu, and kids: Don't rush to antibiotics



If your child has a sore throat, cough, or runny nose, you might think a health care provider will prescribe antibiotics. But most of the time, children don't need antibiotics to treat these symptoms of a respiratory illness. In fact, antibiotics can do more harm than good. Here's why:

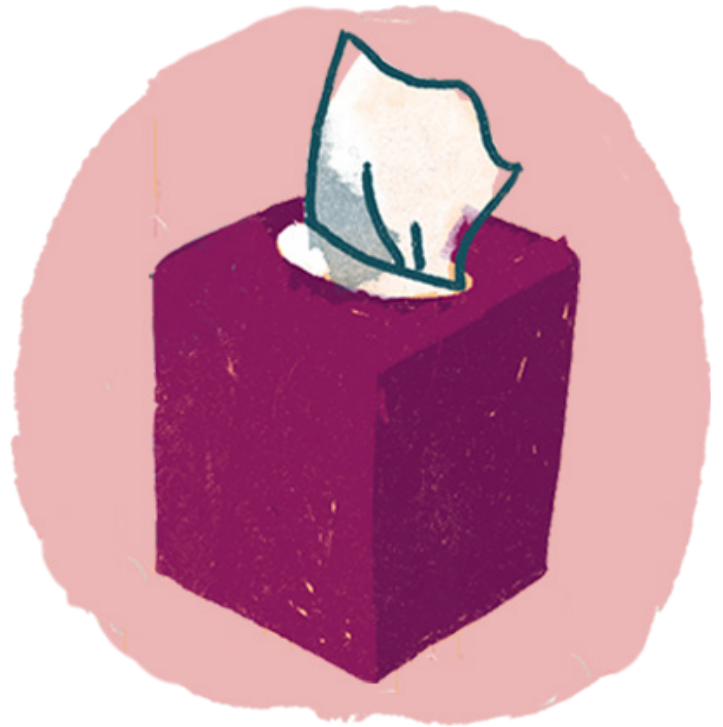
Antibiotics fight bacteria, not viruses.

If your child has a bacterial infection, antibiotics may help. But if your child has a viral infection, antibiotics will not help your child feel better or keep others from getting sick.

- The common cold and flu are both viruses.
- Chest colds are also usually caused by viruses.
- Bronchiolitis is a particular type of chest cold that often causes wheezing and can make some young infants very sick. It is also caused by a virus.
- Most sinus infections (sinusitis) are caused by viruses. The symptoms are a lot of mucus in the nose and post-nasal drip.
- Mucus that is coloured does not necessarily mean your child has a bacterial infection.

Antibiotics do not help treat the majority of respiratory infections except in some instances.

The flu is always caused by a virus. Sometimes infants and children get bacterial infections on top of the flu. When a child has BOTH the flu and a bacterial infection, antibiotics may be needed.



Sometimes bacteria can cause sinus infections, but even then, the infection usually clears up on its own in a week or so. The majority of common ear infections also clear up on their own without antibiotics.

Most sore throats are caused by viruses. But some sore throats, like strep throat, are bacterial infections. Strep throat symptoms include fever, redness, and trouble swallowing usually without a cough and runny nose.

Your health care provider will decide if your child needs a strep test. If the test shows it is strep, then the health care provider will prescribe antibiotics.

When does your child need antibiotics?

Your child MIGHT have a bacterial infection in these cases, and you should check with your health care provider if these happen:

- Symptoms of a sinus infection do not get better in 7 days, or they get better and then worse again.
- Your child has a nasal discharge and a fever for several days in a row, or nasal discharge and a headache that won't go away.

Your child WILL need antibiotics in these cases:

- If the child has a bacterial form of pneumonia.
- Whooping cough (pertussis) is diagnosed.
- Your child has strep throat, based on a rapid strep test or a throat culture.

REMEMBER: For infants younger than 3 months of age, call your health care provider right away for any fever above 38°C or higher. Very young infants can have serious infections that might need antibiotics and even might need to be put in the hospital.

Antibiotics have risks if taken when not needed.

They can cause diarrhea or vomiting. Some children have allergies to antibiotics which can be serious and life-threatening.

The misuse and overuse of antibiotics encourages bacteria to change. This means antibiotics may not work as well when needed.

Things you can do to help with colds & flu:

Try to stop the spread.

- Wash your own hands and your child's hands with water and soap.
- Ensure that your child's routine vaccinations are up to date and consider a yearly flu shot if your child is 6 months of age or older.
- Try to keep your child home so they can get plenty of rest when they are sick.

Relieve symptoms.

- Keep your child as comfortable as possible. Check temperature and make sure they drink plenty of fluids.
- To ease immediate pain or fever use acetaminophen (Infants' or Children's Tylenol® and generic). Ibuprofen (Children's Motrin®, Advil®, and generic) may also be used if your child is 6 months of age and older.
 - Do NOT give acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin®) or any medicine containing it to children.
 - Don't give over-the-counter cough and cold medicines to children younger than 6 years old unless your health care provider prescribes them.
- For coughs, may give one teaspoon of pasteurized honey at bedtime if older than 12 months of age. Rinse teeth after giving.

This is called “antibiotic resistance.” When bacteria are resistant to the antibiotics used to treat them.

About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

How this pamphlet was created:

This pamphlet was adapted with permission from a similar pamphlet used in the US Choosing Wisely campaign, organized by the ABIM Foundation. Modifications were made to ensure relevance for a Canadian audience. This pamphlet was reviewed by Dr. Olivia Ostrow.

This pamphlet is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this pamphlet is at your own risk.