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Your Child and Antibiotics: Unnecessary Antibiotics Can Be Harmful

About Antibiotics

Antibiotics are among the most powerful and important medicines known. When used properly they can save lives, but used improperly, they can actually harm your child. Antibiotics should not be used to treat viral infections (common cold).

Bacteria and viruses

Two main types of germs-**bacteria and viruses**-cause most infections. In fact, viruses cause most coughs and sore throats and all colds. Bacterial infections can be cured by antibiotics, but common viral infections never are. Your child recovers from these common viral infections when the illness has run its course.

Resistant bacteria

New strains of bacteria have become resistant to antibiotics. These bacteria are not killed by antibiotics. Some of these resistant bacteria can be treated with more powerful medicines, which may need to be given by vein (IV) in the hospital, and a few are already untreatable. The more antibiotics prescribed, the higher the chance that your child will be infected with resistant bacteria.

How bacteria become resistant

Each time we take antibiotics, sensitive bacteria are killed, but resistant ones may be left to grow and multiply. Repeated use and improper use of antibiotics are some of the main causes of the increase in resistant bacteria. These resistant bacteria can also be spread to others in the family and community.

A Prescription for parents

Learn about the differences between bacterial and viral infections, and talk to our office about them. Understand that antibiotics should never be used to treat viral infections.

When are antibiotics needed, and when are they not needed?

Specific bacterial infections require the use of antibiotics:

Colds:

Colds are caused by viruses and may sometimes last for 2 weeks or more. Antibiotics have no effect on these colds. Over the counter cough and cold preparations can be used to provide relief while the illness runs its course.

Cough or bronchitis:

Usually caused by a virus and children rarely need antibiotics for treatment of bronchitis.

Ear infections:

Most ear infections need antibiotics to get better.

Sinus infections:

May be present if your child has a cough day and night for greater than 10 days, and then may require an antibiotic. Most children with thick yellow or green mucus do not have sinus infections.

Sore throat:

Most cases are caused by viruses. Only one kind, "strep throat," requires treatment with antibiotics, but can usually wait 48 hours to be treated.

Can treating a viral infection hurt my child?

Viral infections may sometimes lead to bacterial infections. But treating viral infections with antibiotics to prevent bacterial infections does not work, and may lead to infection with resistant bacteria. If you feel your child's illness is getting worse or not improving, please call our office so we can properly advise you.

What can I do to protect my child from antibiotic-resistant bacteria?

Antibiotics should only be used to treat bacterial infections. Antibiotics will not cure most colds, coughs, sore throats, or runny noses-your child's immune system will fight off these viral infections.

If mucus from my child's nose changes from clear to yellow or green, does this mean that my child needs an antibiotic?

Yellow or green mucus does not mean that your child has a bacterial infection. It is normal for the mucus to get thick and change color during a viral cold.

Does this mean I should never give my child antibiotics?

Antibiotics are very powerful medicines, and should be used only to treat bacterial infections. If an antibiotic is prescribed, make sure you take the entire course. Liquid antibiotics (once mixed at the pharmacy) should be thrown out after 14 days. Gantrisin (liquid) can be used for up to one year after it is prescribed

How do I know if my child has a viral or bacterial infection?

Call our office if you think that your child might need treatment. But remember, colds are caused by viruses, and should not be treated with antibiotics.