Colds, flu, and other respiratory illnesses in adults:
When you need antibiotics—and when you don’t

If you have a sore throat, cough, or sinus pain, you might expect to take antibiotics. After all, you feel bad, and you want to get better fast. But antibiotics don’t help most respiratory infections, and they can even be harmful. Here’s why.

**Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses.** Antibiotics fight infections caused by bacteria. But most respiratory infections are caused by viruses. Antibiotics can’t cure a virus.

Viruses cause:
- All colds and flu.
- Almost all sinus infections.
- Most bronchitis (chest colds).
- Most sore throats, especially with a cough, runny nose, hoarse voice, or mouth sores.

**Antibiotics have risks.** Antibiotics can upset the body’s natural balance of good and bad bacteria. Antibiotics can cause:
- Nausea, vomiting, and severe diarrhea.
- Vaginal infections.
- Nerve damage.
- Torn tendons.
- Life-threatening allergic reactions.

Many adults go to emergency rooms because of antibiotic side effects.

**Overuse of antibiotics is a serious problem.** Wide use of antibiotics breeds “superbugs.” These are bacteria that become resistant to antibiotics. They can cause drug-resistant infections, even disability or death. The resistant bacteria—the superbugs—can also spread to family members and others.
Overuse of antibiotics leads to high costs.
Drug-resistant infections usually need more costly
drugs and extra medical care. And sometimes you
need a hospital stay. In the U.S., this costs us over
$20 billion a year.

You may need an antibiotic if you have one of
the infections listed below.

You have a sinus infection that doesn’t get better
in 10 days. Or it gets better and then suddenly gets
worse.

You have a fever of 102°F, or fever over 100.6°F
for 3 days or more, green or yellow mucus, or face
pain for three or more days in a row.

You have bacterial pneumonia.
- Symptoms can include cough with colored
  mucus, fever of at least 100.6°F, chills,
  shortness of breath, and chest pain when
  you take a deep breath.
- The diagnosis is made with a physical exam
  and a chest x-ray.

You have whooping cough (pertussis).
- The main symptoms are fits of severe, rapid
coughing. They may end with a “whoop” sound.
- The diagnosis should be checked with a swab of
  the throat.
- Your family may need antibiotics also.

You have strep throat.
- Symptoms include sudden throat pain, pain
  when swallowing, a fever of at least 100.6°F,
  and swollen glands.
- The diagnosis should be done with a rapid strep
test, which uses a swab of the throat.

If your doctor does prescribe antibiotics, follow the
directions carefully and take all your pills. This
helps prevent the growth of superbugs.

Advice from Consumer Reports

How to manage respiratory infections

Try to avoid them.
Wash your hands often and well with plain soap
and water. And get these vaccines:
- Flu (influenza) vaccine. Get this once a year.
  October or November is best.
- Pneumonia vaccine. When you turn 65, get
two shots, a year apart. If you are younger
and have heart, lung, or liver disease,
diabetes, problems with alcohol, or you
smoke, ask your doctor if you should get
the shots.
- Tdap vaccine for tetanus, diphtheria, and
  pertussis (whooping cough). All adults should
get this once. Then get a tetanus-diphtheria
booster shot every 10 years. Pregnant women
should get a Tdap shot during their third
trimester.

Relieve symptoms.
- Get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids.
- Use a humidifier and clean it daily.
- Ease pain and reduce fever with:
  Acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic)
  Ibuprofen (Advil and generic)
- For nasal discomfort use saline (salt water)
drops or spray.
- To soothe a sore throat, gargle with salt
  water, drink warm beverages, or eat or
drink something cool.
- To ease a cough, breathe steam from a kettle
  or shower. For mild, short-term relief, try an
over-the-counter cough medicine that has
dextromethorphan. See a doctor if coughing
lasts three days or more.