

## Many infections clear up without antibiotics



# Your body cures itself of most common infections.

The body's own immune system is effective against many common infections caused by bacteria or viruses. On the other side of this leaflet, you can find tips on what you can do to alleviate your discomfort.

## **Antibiotics are only effective against bacteria – not against viruses**

Many common infections are caused by viruses, which give you the same symptoms – and last just as long – as infections caused by bacteria. Colds, influenza, conjunctivitis, cough, sore throat, earache and painful sinuses are often caused by a virus.

Antibiotics is a common name for many different types of medication used to fight infections. The best known is penicillin.

Viral infections clear up without treatment with antibiotics. You will not recover any quicker if you take antibiotics for a viral infection, but risk having side effects such as diarrhoea, stomach pain and a rash. Your body contains beneficial bacteria, which are killed by antibiotics; this can make room for pathogenic bacteria or fungi that can make you ill.

For this reason, it is important that you are not given antibiotics “just to be on the safe side”, but only when you really need them.

## **Resistant bacteria – is this a problem in Denmark?**

Resistant bacteria are bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. Resistant bacteria develop because bacteria get used to antibiotics. The more antibiotics are used, the more resistant bacteria develop.

In many parts of the world, bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics are common. You must therefore tell your doctor if you become ill abroad or immediately after you return home.

Resistant bacteria are increasingly becoming a problem in Denmark. This can mean that common infections which require antibiotics cannot be treated because there are no antibiotics that can kill the resistant bacteria.

### **When you are treated with antibiotics**

Different antibiotics work on different bacteria. No antibiotic works on all bacteria. For this reason, only take antibiotics that your doctor has prescribed for you. Your doctor chooses which type of antibiotics to treat you with based on an assessment of the bacteria to be killed, and where the infection is in the body. It may be necessary for your doctor to take a sample to determine if your infection is caused by bacteria and which antibiotics will work.

When you are given antibiotics, it is important that you finish the course. This also applies if you feel better before the course is finished. If there are more tablets in the packet than you should take, return the excess medicine to the pharmacy. Do not take antibiotics you have been given by other people, and do not pass on antibiotics to others.

### **How do you avoid infection?**

You can reduce the risk of getting an infection or infecting others by washing your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap or using antibacterial hand wash. Use a clean towel and do not share towels with others when you or they are ill. Sneeze and cough into a disposable handkerchief or, if necessary, your sleeve. If you sneeze into your hands, wash them or clean them with antibacterial hand wash.

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### **Would you like to know more?**

If you would like to know more about infections and the use of antibiotics, go to [patienthaandbogen.dk](http://patienthaandbogen.dk) and [antibiotikaellerej.dk](http://antibiotikaellerej.dk)

# Advice for common infections for which antibiotics are rarely necessary

## Colds

**Colds are always caused by viruses. They can last up to two weeks.**

- Make sure you drink enough fluids and rest.
- If your nose is blocked, you can try to alleviate discomfort by:
  - Using a saline spray or drops;\*
  - Using over-the-counter nasal spray or drops for nasal congestion (for max. ten days as prolonged/frequent use can exacerbate swelling of the nasal mucous membrane);
  - Raising your headboard when you lie down.\*\*
- You can also find out more under Sore throat and Cough.

## Influenza

**Influenza is always caused by a virus. It can last for up to two weeks.**

- Make sure you rest.
- Make sure you drink enough fluids; this is particularly important if you have a high fever.
- Cool down your body if you have fever (for example, wear only a few clothes, sleep under a sheet instead of a quilt, use cool cloths).
- Take over the counter painkillers (for example, paracetamol), if you need pain relief.

## Cough

**This is very common with a cold, where the cough can persist for several weeks.**

- Cough medicine has a limited effect.
- Throat sweets, lozenges etc. and hot drinks can provide relief.
- Make sure you drink enough fluids. This can alleviate dry coughs and make it easier to cough up any mucus.
- Try raising your headboard when you lie down.\*\*

## Pus in eyes/red eyes (conjunctivitis)

**Most forms of conjunctivitis are caused by a virus and are mild. They clear up without antibiotics. It is particularly common in children with colds.**

- Clean the eye with cotton wool soaked in lukewarm water (preferably salt water\*) several times a day. Use a new piece of cotton wool for each eye.
- You can also put saline drops in your eye.\*
- Children with mild conjunctivitis are welcome to come to the nursery and day care centre. If the child is clearly sensitive to light, has strong pus discharge or his/her general condition is affected, the child must be treated with eye drops for at least two days and the symptoms must disappear before the child can come to the nursery and day care centre.

## **Sore throat (throat infection)**

**Sore throats are caused by viruses in two out of three cases.**

- Make sure you drink enough fluids and rest.
- Throat sweets, lozenges etc. and hot drinks can provide relief.
- Take over-the-counter painkillers (for example, paracetamol), if you need pain relief.

## **Earache (middle ear infection)**

**Earache is most often caused by a virus, but it can also be caused by bacteria.**

**It is very common in children, for example in connection with a cold.**

- Try to alleviate earache by raising the headboard.\*\*
- Take over the counter painkillers (for example, paracetamol), if you need pain relief.
- A less congested nose can alleviate earache. See also Colds.
- Make sure you drink enough fluids and rest.

## **Painful sinuses (sinusitis)**

**Sinusitis is often caused by a virus. It can persist for several weeks.**

- It may help to rinse your nose with salt water\* a few times a day. Use a nasal rinse/nasal shower. This can help to reduce swelling in the nasal mucous membrane so that there is better drainage from the sinuses to the nose. You can also use over-the-counter nasal spray or drops for nasal congestion (for max. ten days as prolonged/frequent use can exacerbate swelling of the nasal mucous membrane).
- Try raising your headboard when you lie down.\*\*
- Make sure you drink enough fluids and rest.
- Take over-the-counter painkillers (for example, paracetamol), if you need pain relief.

**Contact your doctor** – if you do not feel better or your condition becomes worse. Pay special attention to symptoms in infants and very young children and contact your doctor if necessary.

### **When using over the counter medicine:**

Always follow the instructions on the packet or your doctor's advice.

Medicine should not be given to children under 2 years without consulting a doctor.

\* You can buy sterile saline solution. You can also make salt water yourself by putting one level teaspoon of salt in ½ litre of boiling water. Let the water cool before use.

\*\* The headboard of the bed can be raised, for example, by placing blocks or books under the legs at the head of the bed or putting folded towels or cushions under the head end of the mattress or pillow.

## **Remember:**

- **Most common infections do not require antibiotics – they clear up by themselves.**
- **You do not need antibiotics “to be on the safe side”.**
- **If you take antibiotics when you have a virus, it does not shorten the course of the illness, but you risk having side effects.**
- **The more antibiotics you use, the greater the risk of resistant bacteria developing.**
- **Take your temperature before contacting your doctor, if you have signs of infection.**
- **If your doctor gives you antibiotics, finish the course.**
- **Only take antibiotics that your doctor has prescribed for you.**
- **If there is more medicine in the packet than you should take, return the excess medicine to the pharmacy.**
- **Some over-the-counter medicines can alleviate your discomfort. Consult your doctor or pharmacist.**