

Discussing Antibiotics for Bacterial and Viral Infections With Patients, Residents and Caregivers

Communication and Conversation Reminders

1. Use active listening and avoid medical jargon.
2. Minimize interruptions. Turn off or silence devices.
3. Be aware of your body language.
4. Practice teach-back. Head nodding does not always assure knowledge and recall.

Talking Points

How are Viruses and Bacteria Similar and Different?

- Our bodies need some bacteria to function properly. For example, we need bacteria to digest food to breakdown the nutrients and keep our immune systems strong.
- Unfortunately, antibiotics cannot tell the difference between harmful and helpful bacteria. So, they also kill or weaken the bacteria that keep us healthy.
- In contrast to bacteria, most viruses cause illness or disease.
- Your doctor can identify the most likely cause of your illness by listening to your history, doing a physical exam, and if needed, order additional testing.
- Tests (swabs, cultures, blood or urine tests) may be ordered to help confirm or rule out bacterial vs. viral infection.
- Infections caused by viruses and harmful bacteria can cause similar symptoms and are spread through exposure (coughing, sneezing, contact with other people, animals, surfaces, food or water).
- Viruses and harmful bacteria can cause mild, moderate and severe disease and/or death (consider endemics /pandemics).

Antibiotic Benefits and Risks

- **Benefit:** Most bacterial infections respond quickly to antibiotics in people with healthy immune systems.
 - Best practice: only use antibiotics when the infection is clearly bacterial because there can be side effects and risks
- **Risks:** Antibiotics are not effective against viruses and can actually cause harm. These risks include:
 - Mild to moderate side effects and/or disease:
 - Frequent loose stools
 - Nausea/vomiting and/or stomach pain
 - Skin rash
 - Allergic reactions (hives, itching, swollen tongue, lips or throat)
 - Yeast infections

- Severe and life threatening conditions:
 - Life-threatening allergic reactions
 - Clostridioides difficile (C.diff) which can cause severe diarrhea, stomach pain and/or even lead to death. C. diff infection may take weeks or months to treat and can cause long term complications.
- Overuse of antibiotics can cause bacteria to become resistant to antibiotics - making the illness untreatable or making it difficult to fight off other bacterial infections.

How Can You Prevent Illness and Spread of Infection?

- Wash your hands frequently to avoid getting ill and spreading illness.
- Avoid crowds when you are not feeling well.
- Cover your cough.
- Practice social distancing during outbreaks.
- Keep up to date on your vaccinations.

How Can You Help Your Body Heal During Illness?

- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink at least six glasses of water daily (avoid coffee, tea, alcohol).
- Take over the counter medications or natural treatments as recommended by your doctor.
- Use prescriptions or other treatments as ordered by your doctor.

Sources:

- [Antibiotic Do's & Don'ts](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- [Antibiotics Aren't Always the Answer](#), CDC
- [Antibiotic Use and Antibiotic Resistance: Answers for Patients](#), Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)
- [Discussing Infectious Concerns About Residents With Family Members and Caregivers](#), Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)
- [Physician Communication](#), Wisconsin Department of Health (DHS)
- [Urinary Tract Infection Project](#), DHS
- [Effective Communication with Residents and Families](#), CDC