

“Ten Things Patients Should Know” Series

HOW TO USE ANTIBIOTICS SAFELY

1. **PATIENTS NEED TO CHANGE THEIR MINDSET** about antibiotics. They are serious medications that need to be used with care.
2. **ANTIBIOTICS ARE ONLY EFFECTIVE FOR BACTERIAL INFECTIONS** – *they have no effect on viruses.*
3. **ANTIBIOTICS ARE NOT ALWAYS NEEDED.** Some studies show that as many as 90-95% of all infections are either viral infections or low-risk bacterial infections *that do not require the use of antibiotics.*
4. **DO NOT PRESSURE YOUR DOCTOR TO PRESCRIBE ANTIBIOTICS** if they are not clearly indicated. They are not needed for every cough or sore throat, which are usually viral infections.
5. The **OVERUSE OF ANTIBIOTICS** is one of the main causes of resistance – a situation in which bacteria that are over-exposed to antibiotics learn to change, or mutate, to resist being destroyed. These resistant bacteria are often referred to as “superbugs.”
6. The **BACTERIA BECOME RESISTANT, NOT THE PERSON**, which is why resistant infections don’t only happen to people who overuse antibiotics. The overuse of antibiotics by others can lead to the resistant bacteria that find their way into your body.
7. **YOU MAY NEED ANTIBIOTICS BEFORE SURGERY**, which is called “antibiotic prophylaxis” or “pre-medication.” Ask your provider if you need antibiotics before a procedure, especially if you have an artificial heart valve or a history of endocarditis.
8. After a **JOINT REPLACEMENT** you need to take antibiotics before any dental procedure that may cause the gums to bleed. Dental visits can release bacteria from the mouth into the bloodstream where it can settle on the new joint and cause an infection.
9. **FINISH YOUR ENTIRE DOSE** of antibiotics or you may be reducing the numbers of bacteria but not killing them, which can prolong your illness and allow the bacteria to change and become resistant.
10. **DO NOT SELF-MEDICATE WITH UNUSED ANTIBIOTICS.** Do not “borrow” leftover antibiotics from a friend. You may be taking an antibiotic that is not effective for your particular infection.