

a healthy conversation

The Future of Antibiotics

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From Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield

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Chances are, you've taken antibiotics at some point in your life. Antibiotics are good drugs – if they are taken for the right reasons. Most of the time, you don't need antibiotics when you are sick. It's estimated that up to 50 percent of antibiotic use is either unnecessary or inappropriate.

“When you have a virus, the illness needs to run its course,” says Dr. Bill Jagiello, D.O., medical director at Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield. “Flu, sore throats and acute bronchitis are caused by viruses. Antibiotics treat bacterial infections, not viruses.”

According to Jagiello, most childhood illnesses get better without antibiotics in seven days or less. He adds, “When it comes to viruses, antibiotics will not make you feel better, will not help you recover more quickly and will not keep others from getting sick.”

The lowdown on antibiotics

Antibiotics are used to treat

infections caused by bacteria. They are the second most commonly used class of drugs in the United States.

“The discovery of antibiotics was the game changer of modern medicine,” says Jagiello. “They have saved countless lives and cured infections that are impossible to treat any other way.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, antibiotics have been used so widely and for such a long time period that the infectious organisms they are designed to kill have adapted to them, making them less effective.

One example of bacteria that resists many common antibiotics is MRSA, a staph bacteria that affects more and more healthy, young people. Other examples include bacteria that can cause meningitis, certain sexually transmitted diseases and respiratory tract infections.

Five questions to ask your provider about antibiotics

The IA Healthcare Collaborative has developed a campaign called Choosing Wisely® to

ensure the right type of care is delivered at the right time. When it comes to antibiotics, Choosing Wisely recommends five general questions to ask your health care provider:

1. **Do I really need antibiotics?** Antibiotics fight bacterial infections, like strep throat, whooping cough and bladder infections. But they don't fight viruses — like common colds, flu, or most sore throats and sinus infections.

2. **What are the risks?** Antibiotics can cause diarrhea, vomiting, and more. They can also lead to antibiotic resistance.

3. **Are there simpler, safer options?** Sometimes all you need is rest and plenty of liquid.

4. **How much do they cost?** Antibiotics are usually not expensive. But if you take them when it isn't necessary, they may not work for you in the future — and that may cost you a lot of time and money.

5. **How do I safely take antibiotics?** If your doctor prescribes antibiotics, take them exactly as directed, even if you feel better.

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