

# Antibiotics

## Tips for Families & Healthcare Professionals

### Why is it important to talk about antibiotics use?

Antibiotics are commonly used medications. They help treat several different infections caused by bacteria, such as urinary tract infections and pneumonia. However, antibiotics may not always help or may even cause problems. For example, antibiotics do not treat colds or the flu, which are caused by viruses. Sometimes even the right antibiotic will not work if an infection is overwhelming. A patient who is very frail or has multiple medical problems may not be able to fight off the infection even with antibiotics.

### What are the benefits of antibiotics?

Antibiotics are powerful medications that can cure most bacterial infections. If the infection is causing uncomfortable symptoms, antibiotics can improve comfort. Many antibiotics can be given at home or in a nursing facility, which may prevent a trip to the emergency room or hospital.

### What are the risks of antibiotics?

Like all medications, antibiotics can have side effects depending on the medication. These can include upset stomach, diarrhea, or yeast infections. These side effects can be bad enough that a hospitalization may be required to treat them. Some patients may need to go to the hospital to be given antibiotics.

The widespread use of antibiotics has created several bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics, meaning that the usual antibiotics no longer work. These resistant bacteria can cause serious, life-threatening illnesses for patients including MRSA, which causes skin infections, and C. Diff, which causes severe diarrhea.

### How do antibiotics fit with goals of care?

It is important to consider whether the use of antibiotics is consistent with a patient's preferences or goals of care. Advance care planning tools like the Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment (POST) Form can help explore goals of care and how antibiotics fit with these goals.

## Antibiotics and the Indiana POST form

The Indiana Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment (POST) form allows a patient to document his or her antibiotic treatment preferences. The goals of care should be considered when making a decision about antibiotics. If a patient's overall care goal is focused on comfort, consider whether the antibiotic will make the patient more comfortable or if there are other ways to keep him or her comfortable. Other patients prefer to take antibiotics to stabilize a medical problem or extend life.

## When are antibiotics needed for comfort?

Sometimes antibiotics are needed to treat the symptoms caused by the infections. For example, urinary tract infections may require antibiotic treatment to ensure comfort if the patient is experiencing painful symptoms like burning. However, a positive urine culture or fever alone is not necessarily a signal that the patient is uncomfortable. People who prefer comfort measures may choose not to treat recurrent infections. Other approaches may be used to keep patients comfortable.

## What about antibiotics near the end of life?

It may be especially important to find other ways to ensure comfort for patients who are dying when the goal is to focus on comfort rather than trying to extend life. For example, some people may decide against treating reoccurring pneumonias related to advanced lung disease or swallowing problems. These conditions can lead to saliva and fluids entering the lungs and cannot be fixed. Other ways to keep someone comfortable include positioning and oxygen to ease breathing. Medications to treat fever, pain, and shortness of breath may ease symptoms without treating the underlying infection. Using these approaches may avoid antibiotic side effects and prevent an unwanted final transfer to the emergency department or hospital.