Coughs, colds and antibiotics

Respiratory infections and using antibiotics safely

Antibiotics treat some bacterial infections. They do not treat cold or flu viruses, and are not needed for every cough.

Caring for yourself

- Rest, drink regularly and avoid smoking. A suitable painkiller may help discomfort; check cold-and-flu products for duplicate ingredients.
- A warm honey drink may soothe a cough in adults and children over 1 year. Do not give honey to babies under 1 year or hot drinks to small children.
- Avoid bowls of steaming water because of burn risk. Ask a pharmacist before giving cough or cold products to children.

If an antibiotic is prescribed

- Follow the exact dose, timing and duration prescribed. Do not share antibiotics, save them for another illness or use someone else's supply.
- Tell the prescriber about allergies, pregnancy, other medicines and warfarin. Read the medicine leaflet and ask about missed doses or interactions.
- If you have a delayed prescription, confirm exactly when to start it and when to seek reassessment.

When to be reviewed

- Seek advice if you feel very unwell, symptoms worsen, fever persists beyond 3 days or a cough lasts over 3 weeks. Coughing blood needs prompt assessment.
- Pregnancy, older age, reduced immunity and chronic heart, lung or kidney disease justify earlier advice.

Emergency: call 112

Severe breathing difficulty, blue or grey lips, collapse, confusion or severe chest pain needs emergency help. Swelling of the tongue or throat or difficulty breathing after medicine may be anaphylaxis.

My illness and treatment plan

Coughs, colds and antibiotics

Wash hands, cover coughs and dispose of used tissues.

Report troublesome side effects; severe or bloody diarrhoea during or after antibiotics needs medical advice.

Symptoms started / diagnosis discussed

Self-care and pain-relief advice

Antibiotic, if prescribed

Dose, timing and duration

Delayed prescription: when to start

When and how to seek reassessment

Questions or notes for my appointment

Sources and further reading

NHS: respiratory tract infections
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/respiratory-tract-infection/

NHS: antibiotics
https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/antibiotics/

NHS: antibiotic side effects
https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/antibiotics/side-effects/

General information. Follow your individual clinical plan. Sources checked 31 October 2026; review due October 2027.