



INFORMATION ON ANTIBIOTICS

Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections in our ENT practice. We prescribe antibiotics if we strongly suspect a bacterial infection may be present--such as acute sinus infections, ear infections, or throat infections. We generally try to avoid using antibiotics if we do not suspect that a bacterial infection is present. Like many aspects of treatment, the benefits of treatment with antibiotics must be balanced against the risks of antibiotics.

There is no doubt that antibiotics provide benefits in fighting infections. For example, it is important to treat acute strep throat infections with antibiotics to decrease the risk of complications. It is also very helpful to treat certain ear infections and sinus infections with antibiotics to lessen the severity of the illness and speed the recovery process. Still, not all infections require treatment with antibiotics. For example, most cases of laryngitis are caused by viruses and therefore antibiotics provide little benefit. The common cold is also caused by viral infection and therefore antibiotics are not helpful.

It is also important to understand that antibiotics have potential risks that must be considered:

--All antibiotics can cause GI upset or diarrhea. This is because antibiotics kill populations of the healthy bacteria that live in our GI tract. The disturbance of healthy bacterial populations can cause overgrowth of unhealthy bacteria and can result in diarrhea. One example of this is a dangerous type of diarrhea called C. difficile colitis. Antibiotic-associated diarrhea can cause severe illness requiring hospitalization. For this reason, we recommend that patients who are prescribed antibiotics for any type of ENT infection also take probiotics (available over-the-counter) to help prevent antibiotic-associated diarrhea. Probiotics help prevent the GI issues that can arise with usage of antibiotics. It is important to inform your treating physician if you develop diarrhea after starting a course of antibiotics.

--All antibiotic usage can result in the development of strains of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. Resistant bacterial infections are harder to treat and therefore more dangerous. This does not mean that we should refrain from using antibiotics but that we should be careful to use them judiciously.

--Antibiotics can cause allergic reactions and other types of adverse drug reactions. These reactions can cause illness ranging from a minor rash all the way up to severe illness or death. If you have a history of a drug allergy or other adverse drug reaction, please inform your treating physician.

--Patients who take warfarin (aka Coumadin) may experience changes in the effectiveness of the medication if they are also taking antibiotics at the same time. Therefore, patients who take warfarin for anticoagulation must have their blood level (INR) checked regularly during and after treatment. If you take warfarin please inform your PCP office or warfarin clinic if you have been prescribed antibiotics so that this can be monitored closely.