Antibiotics: Fighting Bacterial Infection

I am so sick, why didn’t I get an Antibiotic today?
Antibiotics are medications that are prescribed by your doctor, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner that help fight bacterial infections. Antibiotics do this by killing the bacterial organism or by slowing the growth of the bacteria so that the immune system can remove it from the body. Antibiotics include medications like amoxicillin, penicillin, and the “zpack” and treat illnesses such as strep throat, urinary tract infections, and pneumonia.

Antibiotics do NOT treat viruses. If you did not receive an antibiotic today you are likely suffering from a virus. This can include a cold, the flu, bronchitis, some ear infections and sinus infections as well as sore throats not caused by the Strep bacteria.

Why can’t I get an Antibiotic just in case?
An antibiotic will not be helpful for a virus. In fact, using an antibiotic when you have a virus may create more or bigger issues than your current infection. Common side effects of antibiotics include upset stomach, vomiting, diarrhea, yeast infections, and in some cases fatal allergic reactions.

Even scarier is the risk of creating a “Superbug”! These superbugs are bacterial infections that do not respond to antibiotics. This happens when antibiotics are prescribed inappropriately or when antibiotics are not taken as prescribed. While the general (healthy) population can fight off a bacterial infection even without antibiotics, results can be deadly for those with compromised immune systems, the very young or the elderly population.

How can my provider tell if I have a virus or a bacterial infection?
Viruses are much more common than bacterial infections, so the likelihood of you having a virus versus having a bacteria is higher. Some tests that can be done in the office will tell us right away if you have a bacterial infection, e.g. a rapid strep test. Also, it is always necessary for your provider to get a detailed history of your symptoms and look for signs of infection during your physical assessment.

BUT my mucus is green!?
The color of your mucus does not actually tell us if you have a bacterial or viral infection. This color change is spurred by a part of your immune system called white blood cells. These cells travel to the infected area to help you heal and in mass quantities will turn your mucus yellow or green. However, if you are coughing up red or brown mucus, be sure to let your provider know.

Unfortunately, viruses often last for at least 7-10 days and can last up to 14 days. Coughing can linger for another two weeks! The best medicine for all of these illnesses is REST and FLUIDS.

Here are a few other tips for dealing with symptoms:
- Taking Zinc at the start of symptoms can help lessen the duration and severity of some illnesses.
- Nasal sprays:
  - Good for sinus congestion, ear fullness, and post nasal drip
    - Neti pot/other sinus rinses: be sure to use distilled or boiled (then cooled) water
    - Saline nasal spray
    - Nasal steroid spray – like Flonase.
      - Avoid use if you have cataracts or glaucoma
- Decongestants:
  - Good for sinus congestion and ear fullness/pain
    - You may need to ask the pharmacist for these medications but they are available without a prescription
      - Avoid these medications if you have high blood pressure
- Expectorants aka “guaifenesin”:
  - Good for coughs
    - This ingredient will help thin your mucus
    - Brands include Mucinex and Robitussin
- Pain or fever reducers:
  - Tylenol, Ibuprofen
- Cough suppressants or antitussives:
  - You may see products labeled DM – this stands for dextromethorphan and helps to stop a cough
  - Honey is great for coughs as well
    - These medications should be used minimally in patients with asthma or other chronic lung diseases

**Be mindful that many of the multi-symptom medications you buy over-the-counter (i.e. Dayquil) will have a combination of these medications so be sure to read the label carefully before using or check with your pharmacist.

If you develop any of the following, please call to schedule an appointment:
- Fevers, if:
  - Under 3 months old: fever of 100.4 or higher
  - 3-6 months old: fever of 101 degrees or higher
  - Over 6 months old: fever of 103 or higher
  - Fever lasting more than 3 days
  - Fever and a sore throat
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Symptoms that are not improving after 2 weeks
- Severe pain in ears, face, throat or chest