

Back-up antibiotic prescribing - patient information leaflet

Medicine is often prescribed by a doctor, but other healthcare workers like some nurses and pharmacists can also do this. Where this document says prescriber, this includes all healthcare workers who prescribe medicine.

What is back-up antibiotic prescribing?

Back-up (also called “delayed”) antibiotic prescribing is when a prescription for an antibiotic is written but is not to be collected and used straight away. You can take the prescription to a pharmacy later, to collect the antibiotic, if your symptoms get worse or if symptoms have not got any better after a specific number of days. If you feel better, you should not collect the antibiotic at all.

Why have I been given a back-up prescription?

Your prescriber has assessed your symptoms and has seen signs that you might have an infection. Antibiotics will only fight infections that are caused by bacteria. Antibiotics have no effect on infections caused by a virus, such as the common cold, most coughs and sore throats.

If your infection is caused by a virus, antibiotics do not make the symptoms go away quicker and you might get unwanted effects from taking antibiotics, such as diarrhoea, feeling sick (nausea), being sick (vomiting) and skin rashes. It would be better to let your immune system manage the infection.

Although your prescriber does not think your current symptoms need treating with antibiotics, they would like you to be able to take them if your symptoms get worse or do not improve as expected.

When will I start to feel better?

Your prescriber will advise you about how long your symptoms might last. As long as you are not getting any worse, you do not need to worry if your symptoms take this amount of time to settle, especially if you are getting gradually better each day. If you feel better you should not collect the antibiotic at all.

Is there a specific number of days to wait?

Your symptoms will likely get better by themselves, and you will not need any antibiotics. However, if your prescriber has written you a back-up prescription they should have given you specific instructions about how long to wait; for example, “wait another 3 days and start the antibiotic if you are not feeling better by then”. With a back-up prescription you do not usually need to see the prescriber again.

What should I do if I get any new or worrying symptoms?

Your prescriber will have told you when you should seek further advice. Contact your GP surgery and make an appointment if you develop any new or worrying symptoms.

Can anyone have a back-up prescription?

Back-up prescriptions should never be used for babies under 3 months, and back-up prescriptions are not usually recommended for any children aged under 2 years. People with certain underlying conditions, such as diabetes are more likely to need treatment with an antibiotic straight away.

How can I access my antibiotic if I need to?

You will most likely not need the antibiotic, but if you do, there are several ways to access it.

- Your prescriber may give you a prescription during your consultation with advice for you to wait a certain number of days and only take it to a pharmacy to get the antibiotic if you still need it after waiting the specified number of days or your symptoms worsen.
- Your prescriber may ask you to collect a paper prescription from an agreed location at a later date (for example, collect it from your GP reception or from a pharmacy).
- Your prescriber may ask you to contact your GP practice again to get a prescription after waiting a certain number of days or your symptoms worsen.

You should make sure you know which method your prescriber has used, and that you fully understand how and when you can get your antibiotic prescription.

What if I don't need the antibiotic prescription?

If you do not need the prescription, please destroy it (for safe disposal return to a GP practice or community pharmacy or use a shredder). Do not be tempted to keep it – because it might not be the right medication for a future infection.

Why shouldn't I take an antibiotic 'just in case'?

Prescribers will not prescribe you an antibiotic unless you really need it. There are two reasons why we should not take antibiotics if we don't need them:

- Antibiotics are powerful medicines. They can cause unpleasant unwanted effects, such as feeling sick (nausea), being sick (vomiting), diarrhoea and skin rashes.
- Taking antibiotics when they are not needed, such as for a viral infection, allows bacteria to become "resistant" to the antibiotic. This means that the antibiotic will no longer be able to fight certain bacteria. Antibiotic resistance is a problem and there are already some bacteria that are resistant to several different types of antibiotics; these are called 'super bugs'. We must stop resistant bacteria developing, so that antibiotics will work when we really need them to treat severe and life-threatening infections.

Useful tips to help you treat viral illnesses such as common colds and most coughs and sore throats:

- Get plenty of rest until you feel better.
- Drink plenty of fluids (6–8 drinks, or 2 litres, a day) so you do not get dehydrated.
- Take paracetamol or ibuprofen (if suitable) if you have a fever or aches and pains; make sure you follow the instructions on the packet. Before taking paracetamol, make sure you are not taking any other medicines containing paracetamol - ask your pharmacist for advice if you are not sure. Cold and flu remedies often contain paracetamol.
- You might find a cough medicine helpful - your pharmacist can advise you on which one is most suitable for you.
- Suck a lozenge or sweet to soothe a sore throat.
- Inhaling steam can also help to clear mucus and ease chest tightness. Do not use steam inhalation for young children. Remember that steam can cause burns.