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Antibiotics 101: Understanding Your Prescription and Using It Safely

Antibiotics are powerful, life-saving medications designed to treat infections caused by bacteria. Since their discovery, they have revolutionized medicine, turning once-fatal illnesses into manageable conditions. However, because they are so potent, using them incorrectly can minimize their effectiveness and cause harm to your body.

Why Antibiotics Are Important (And What They Can't Do)

Antibiotics work by either killing bacteria outright or stopping them from reproducing, allowing your body's natural immune system to fight off the remaining bugs. The most critical concept to understand about antibiotics is their target: They only address and work to cure bacterial infections.

What they treat: Strep throat, urinary tract infections (UTIs), bacterial sinus infections, and skin infections (cellulitis).

What they CANNOT treat: Viruses. Antibiotics have zero effect on viral illnesses such as the common cold, the flu, COVID-19, acute bronchitis, or most stomach flus. Taking an antibiotic for a viral infection will not make you feel better, will not cure the illness, and can cause unnecessary side effects.

The Golden Rule: Finish the Entire Course

If you are prescribed an antibiotic, take every dose for the full number of days prescribed, even if you feel completely recovered after day two or three.

- **Why this matters:** When you start taking an antibiotic, it kills off the weakest bacteria first, making your symptoms fade. The strongest, most resilient bacteria survive the longest. If you stop taking the medication early, those strong bacteria will multiply, causing the infection to return.
- **The Danger of Resistance:** The bacteria that return will now be mutated and "immune" to that specific antibiotic. This is called antibiotic resistance, and it makes future infections incredibly difficult—and sometimes impossible—to treat.

Crucial Pointers for Safe Consumption

To get the most out of your medication and protect your body, keep these safety guidelines in mind:

Watch the Clock

- **Maintain Consistent Timing:** Space your doses evenly throughout the day. If a medication is prescribed twice a day, aim to take it every 12 hours. This keeps a steady level of the medicine in your bloodstream to constantly fight the bacteria.

Protect Your Stomach

- **Food vs. Empty Stomach:** Always read the pharmacy label. Some antibiotics (like Amoxicillin) are best taken with food to prevent nausea. Others (like Penicillin or Azithromycin) absorb much better on an empty stomach.
- **Support Your Microbiome:** Antibiotics cannot tell the difference between "bad" infection bacteria and the "good" bacteria living in your gut. To avoid antibiotic-induced diarrhea or stomach upset, consider eating probiotic-rich foods (like yogurt or kefir) or taking a probiotic supplement two to three hours after your antibiotic dose.

Be Mindful of Interactions

- **Ditch the Dairy (With Certain Drugs):** Medications like Doxycycline or Ciprofloxacin bind to the calcium in dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt) and calcium-fortified juices. This stops your body from absorbing the medicine. Avoid dairy for 2 hours before and after taking these specific drugs.
- **Limit Alcohol:** While alcohol doesn't fail-proof all antibiotics, it drastically lowers your immune system's ability to heal and increases common GI side effects like nausea and dizziness.

When to Contact Your Healthcare Provider/Prescriber

Contact your prescriber immediately if you experience signs of an allergic reaction, such as a new skin rash, hives, or swelling of the face and tongue. Additionally, if you develop severe, watery diarrhea accompanied by intense stomach cramping, alert your provider right away, as this can be a sign of a specific intestinal inflammation (*C. difficile*) that requires separate medical evaluation.

The above information was reviewed and validated by David Campbell-O'Dell, DNP, APRN-IP, FNP-BC, FAANP