

Antibiotics

before an operation to reduce risk of infection



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Do antibiotics have harmful side effects?

It is very unusual to suffer harmful side effects from a single dose of antibiotic given to prevent infection just before an operation. The most common side effects of antibiotics are diarrhoea, stomach pain, a sick tummy and vomiting. If the antibiotic makes you feel unwell, talk to your doctor or a member of the healthcare team.

If you have sudden difficulty with your breathing after taking an antibiotic, you should talk to a doctor or member of the healthcare team immediately.

Prepared by HSE National Antimicrobial Resistance & Infection Control Team & HSE National Clinical Programme in Surgery

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Join the Superbug resistance.



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Will I need an antibiotic before my operation?

Sometimes before an operation, you might be prescribed antibiotics right before it. This may be needed even though you have no infection at the time. This is done to reduce your risk of developing an infection from the operation. This practice is called ‘antibiotic prophylaxis’. Examples of operations when an antibiotic is given just before the operation are a hip replacement or bowel operation. For some operations – such as having tonsils out – you might not need an antibiotic.

Antibiotics are best used only when they are needed. Taking an antibiotic you do not need can cause you harm. Therefore, your doctor will decide if you need an antibiotic before your operation, and the healthcare team looking after you will give it to you.

What happens if I do need to get an antibiotic before my operation?

For some antibiotics the dosage needed depends on the patient’s weight. Therefore, depending on the antibiotic prescribed, one of the healthcare team might need to weigh you to work out the best dose of the antibiotic to give you.

For some operations, the healthcare team might need to take a swab from you to see if you carry any superbugs on your skin or in your gut. Examples of superbugs are MRSA and CPE. If you are a carrier of one of these superbugs, you might need a different antibiotic.

How will the antibiotic be given to me?

If you need an antibiotic, it will be given to you by injection or by a drip into a vein shortly before your operation.

How long will I be on the antibiotic?

For most operations, you will only need one dose of antibiotic about an hour before you have your operation. There are some operations where the antibiotic may be continued for a day or two after the operation and then stopped. If you develop an infection after your operation, you may need an antibiotic for longer.

Is there anything I need to do if I’ve been prescribed an antibiotic before my operation?

You need to talk to your doctor or a member of the healthcare team about any other medicines you might be taking, or any other health conditions you have.

Ask yourself the following questions:

Have you any allergies to antibiotics?

If yes, then some antibiotics can’t be used as you could be allergic to them. If you believe you are allergic to an antibiotic, it is very helpful to have as much information as possible about what happened to you when you took the antibiotic in the past. This will help the healthcare team to decide if you had an allergy or some other kind of reaction.

Are you taking other medication?

If yes, please tell your doctor or hospital pharmacist that you are taking other medicines or herbal remedies before you get the antibiotic. Antibiotics can interfere with other medicines – for example, blood thinners such as warfarin, and some medicines used to treat high cholesterol such as ‘statins’.

Could you be pregnant or are you breastfeeding?

If yes, please tell your doctor or hospital pharmacist as some antibiotics won’t suit you.

Do you have liver or kidney problems?

If yes, please tell your doctor or hospital pharmacist as some antibiotics do not work, or you may need a different dose.

Have you ever had a gut infection called *C diff* (*Clostridioides difficile*)?

If yes, then antibiotics can make the *C diff* infection come back again. Some antibiotics are more likely to do this than others. The doctor and members of the healthcare team will decide what antibiotic is safest for you.

If you have questions or doubts, always ask your doctor or a member of the healthcare team.