

# Choosing Wisely<sup>®</sup>

*An initiative of the ABIM Foundation*



## Antibiotics for urinary tract infections in older people

### When you need them—and when you don't

**A**ntibiotics are medicines that can kill bacteria. Doctors often use antibiotics to treat urinary tract infections (UTIs). The main symptoms of UTIs are:

- A burning feeling when you urinate.
- A strong urge to urinate often.

However, many older people get UTI treatment even though they do not have these symptoms. This can do more harm than good. Here's why:

**Antibiotics usually don't help when there are no UTI symptoms.**

Older people often have some bacteria in their urine. This does not mean they have a UTI. But doctors may find the bacteria in a routine test and give antibiotics anyway.

The antibiotic does not help these people.

- It does not prevent UTIs.
- It does not help bladder control.
- It does not help memory problems or balance.



Most older people should not be tested or treated for a UTI unless they have UTI symptoms. And if you do have a UTI and get treated, you usually don't need another test to find out if you are cured. You should only get tested or treated if UTI symptoms come back.

### **Antibiotics have side effects.**

Antibiotics can cause side effects, such as fever, rash, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, headache, tendon ruptures, and nerve damage.

### **Antibiotics can cause future problems.**

Antibiotics can kill “friendly” germs in the body. This can lead to vaginal yeast infections. It can also lead to other infections, and severe diarrhea, hospitalization, and even death.

Also, antibiotics may help “drug-resistant” bacteria grow. These bacteria are harder to kill. They cause illnesses that are harder to cure and more costly to treat. Your doctor may have to try several antibiotics. This increases the risk of complications. The resistant bacteria can also be passed on to others.

### **Antibiotics can be a waste of money.**

Prescription antibiotics can cost from \$15 to more than \$100. If you get an infection from resistant bacteria, you may need more doctor visits and medicines that cost more.

### **When should older people take antibiotics for a UTI?**

If you have UTI symptoms, antibiotics can help.

- The most common UTI symptoms are a painful, burning feeling when you urinate and a strong urge to “go” often.
- Other UTI symptoms in older people may include fever, chills, or confusion. Along with these symptoms, there is usually pain on one side of the back below the ribs or discomfort in the lower abdomen. There may be a change in the way the urine looks or smells.

Some kinds of surgery can cause bleeding in the urinary tract—for example, prostate surgery and some procedures to remove kidney stones or bladder tumors. If you are going to have this surgery, you may need testing and treatment for bacteria in urine.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

© 2017 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American Geriatric Society. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit

[www.choosingwisely.org/patient-resources](http://www.choosingwisely.org/patient-resources)