

Antibiotics for the common cold

The numbers below refer to patients who had symptoms of the common cold or purulent rhinitis (nasal discharge that is coloured). Patients were prescribed either an antibiotic treatment or a placebo (e.g., a sugar pill or no treatment) and received a follow-up examination between one and seven days after treatment.

	100 people who took a placebo	100 people who took antibiotics
Benefits		
How many patients had persisting symptoms?		about 35 in each group
Harms		
How many patients experienced adverse events (e.g. nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea)?	10	18
In general, how does the use of antibiotics affect the treatment of future bacterial infections?		If antibiotics are used too frequently, bacteria that are insensitive to antibiotics can develop and spread. This is known as antibiotic resistance. People who are infected with resistant bacteria are then difficult to treat as the effectiveness of antibiotics is reduced.

Short summary: Antibiotics did not show a benefit in the treatment of the common cold. About the same number of patients had persisting symptoms independent of whether they took antibiotics or a placebo (sugar pill). Side effects occurred more often with antibiotic treatment. Furthermore, when antibiotics are overused, there is a risk of bacteria becoming resistant to antibiotics.

Sources: [1] Kenealy, Arroll. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2013(6):CD000247. [2] BMG (Ed.). The most important terms about antibiotic resistance. 2015.