

# When should antibiotics be used for urinary tract infections (UTIs) in older adults?

Antibiotics are medicines that can kill bacteria. Doctors often use antibiotics to treat urinary tract infections (UTIs).

Bacteria in urine (pee) can be one of the symptoms of a UTI. However, it can be normal for some people to have bacteria in the urine. If a person does not have other symptoms of a UTI, antibiotics are not needed and can be harmful.



## About UTI symptoms

### What are UTI symptoms?

- Pain while peeing
- A burning feeling while peeing
- A need to pee more often than usual
- Pain in your lower stomach
- Pain in your back, just below your ribs
- Fever and chills

New memory changes or confusion could be a sign of many types of infections or issues. Talk to your doctor if you have this symptom.

### What are not UTI symptoms?

- Pee that has an odor or strong smell
- Pee that is darker or lighter than usual
- Cloudy pee

### What could happen if I take antibiotics when I don't need them?

Taking antibiotics when you don't need them can be harmful.

They can cause **side effects** such as:

- Fever
- Rash
- Diarrhea
- Throwing up
- Headaches
- Tendon or nerve damage
- Yeast infections



### Hear from others about UTI symptoms:

“So the mainstream symptom for me is frequency of urination. It’s like my plumbing never stops. Sometimes there’s pain. And so I had the symptoms, and I [tested for bacteria], and it was pretty positive. The doctor prescribed the antibiotic.”

Taking antibiotics when you don't need them can also cause other issues such as:

- **Killing the good bacteria in your body.** We have gut bacteria that are helpful and help us digest our food. When these bacteria are killed, it can lead to stomach problems and more infections.
- **Resistance to antibiotics in the future.** Antibiotic resistance is when bacteria change so that antibiotic medicines can't kill them or stop their growth. Resistant infections can be very hard to treat and can lead to hospitalization or even death. These resistant bacteria can also spread to others and cause a health problem in your community.
- **Extra pills to remember to take**
- **Extra health care costs**

## What else should I know?

Antibiotics rarely keep you from getting a UTI, they usually only help once you already have one. They also do not help with long-term bladder control, memory, or balance issues.



## As a patient, what can I do?

You can take care of your urinary tract:

- Stay hydrated by drinking 6 to 8 glasses of water a day
- Keep track of your symptoms, and talk to your doctor if they get worse
- Talk to your doctor about if and when you need antibiotics

## What can your doctor do?

If your doctor finds bacteria in your urine during a urine test, they can:

- Ask about your symptoms
- Prescribe antibiotics only if you have UTI symptoms, or if your symptoms get worse
- Invite patients to call back if anything changes
- Provide a trusted source for more information



## Hear what others have to say about antibiotic use for UTIs:

This brochure was developed from a Washington University Clinical and Translational Research Funding Program (CTRFP) award, funded by the NIH CTSA Grant Number UL1TR002345. Content came from published papers in academic journals, patients and clinicians who joined the CTRFP research study, and guidelines produced by the Choosing Wisely Initiative of the ABIM foundation, and the AGS Geriatrics Healthcare Professional Societies.

"What I really liked hearing is that you do not have to be on antibiotics [when you have no UTI symptoms]. ... I think maybe it's outmoded our outdated that in the medical profession that there's 'a pill for every ill.' I like the fact that that isn't true." -UTI patient

"We see bacteria in the urine very often. Without symptoms of a UTI, this rarely becomes an issue. Of course, please call your doctor if anything changes and you develop UTI symptoms." -Doctor

"It's not just the test results. It's the test results plus the patients' symptoms that tell us the full story."  
--Nurse Practitioner