

# Choosing Wisely<sup>®</sup>

*An initiative of the ABIM Foundation*



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS

## Treating sinus problems

### Don't rush to antibiotics

**T**he sinuses are small, hollow spaces inside the head. They drain into the nose. The sinuses often cause problems after a cold. They can also cause problems if they get blocked up from hay fever and other allergies. The medical name for sinus problems is sinusitis.

Sinus problems can be very uncomfortable. You may feel stuffed up. You may have yellow, green, or gray mucus. And you may feel pain or pressure around your eyes, cheeks, forehead, or teeth.

Each year, millions of people use antibiotic drugs to treat sinus problems. However, they usually do not need antibiotics. Here's why:

#### **Antibiotics usually do not help sinus problems.**

- Antibiotics kill bacteria. They do not kill viruses or help allergies. Viruses or allergies cause most sinus problems.
- Sinus problems usually get better in a week or so without drugs, even when bacteria cause them.



#### **Antibiotics cost money.**

Most antibiotics do not cost very much. But why waste your money? Patients often ask for antibiotics, and doctors often give them. As a result, Americans spend tens of millions of dollars a year on health care costs.

## Antibiotics have risks.

- About one out of every four people who take antibiotics has side effects, such as dizziness, stomach problems, and rashes.
- In rare cases, people have severe allergic reactions to antibiotics.
- Overuse of antibiotics has become a serious problem. When you use them too much, they stop working as well. Then, when you do need them, they may not help as much.

## When should you use antibiotics?

You usually need an antibiotic when you have an infection that is caused by bacteria, and the infection is not going away on its own. This may be the case when:

- Your symptoms last more than 10 days.
- Your symptoms start to get better, but then get worse again.
- Your symptoms are very severe. You should get immediate treatment if:
  - You have severe pain and tenderness in the area around your nose and eyes.
  - You have signs of a skin infection—such as a hot, red rash that spreads quickly.
  - You have a fever over 102° F.

## When you need an antibiotic, which one should you use?

When you need an antibiotic, ask your doctor if you can use generic amoxicillin. It is usually the best choice. It costs less than \$10 for a prescription. It works just as well as brand-name antibiotics, such as Augmentin, that cost much more.

## What about a CT scan?

A CT scan is a series of X-rays. It gives your doctor a picture of your sinuses.

Some doctors recommend a CT scan when you have a sinus problem. But usually you do not need a CT scan. Generally, you only need a CT scan if you have sinus problems often, or if you are thinking about having sinus surgery.

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.

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