Why do some people need antibiotics?
Information for outpatients and the community

What are antibiotics?
Antibiotics are medicines used to treat or prevent infections caused by bacteria. Most bacteria are harmless, but some can cause infections or disease.

Antibiotics work by helping the body’s natural immune system fight the infection by killing or stopping the growth of the bacteria that may be causing a problem in your body.

Different antibiotics target different bacteria. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses such as those causing colds.

What do I need to know about my antibiotic treatment?
If your doctor prescribes a course of antibiotics you should discuss:

- why an antibiotic is recommended for you
- the name and strength of the antibiotic and how to take it
- side effects that you may experience
- if you are taking any other medications including complimentary and ‘over-the-counter’ preparations.

Resistance to antibiotics
When bacteria develop new ways to defend against antibiotics, it is called ‘antibiotic resistance’.

This means that an antibiotic which used to work may no longer be able to cure your infection. With few new antibiotics being developed and antibiotic resistance increasing, it is becoming more difficult to treat infections.

One of the main causes of antibiotic resistance is antibiotics being used when they are not needed, for example for a common cold. When you visit the doctor, they may explain that antibiotics are not required.

The doctor may suggest other measures to help clear an infection such as rest and pain relief.

How might antibiotic resistance affect me?
Some types of bacteria have become resistant to many different antibiotics. These bacteria may be called ‘superbugs’ in news and television reports.

Infections caused by superbugs are more difficult to treat and have a higher risk of complications.

The more antibiotics you take the greater the chance of having an infection caused by a superbug.

You can help prevent antibiotic resistance by:

- telling your doctor you only want antibiotics if it is really necessary
- taking your antibiotics as prescribed, try not to miss doses and complete the full course
- take simple steps to avoid infections and prevent them from spreading e.g. hand hygiene.
Common cold
Antibiotics do not work for viruses such as the common cold

Preventing the spread of colds and flu
There are things you can do to protect yourself and others.
• Avoid contact with people who have a cold or flu.
• Use tissues when coughing and sneezing and throw them away after use.
• Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose.
• Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

Remember
• Take your antibiotics exactly as instructed.
• Never take antibiotics prescribed for someone else.
• Don’t expect antibiotics from your doctor - they may be unnecessary.
• Antibiotics don’t work for viruses e.g. cold and flu.
• Don’t keep unused antibiotics for another time - return left over medication to your pharmacy for disposal.
• Misuse and overuse of antibiotics is causing antibiotic resistance.
• Antibiotic exposure causes an increased risk of infection with ‘superbugs’.