PATIENTS FOR PATIENT SAFETY CANADA / PATIENTS POUR LA SÉCURITÉ DES PATIENTS DU CANADA

What are the first steps to deal with an infection? Wait and See

Scenario: Morgan woke up with a runny nose, cough, sore throat, sinus pain, and an aching body. She thought about the big week ahead. She couldn't afford to be sick. She visited a doctor, hopeful for advice on how to feel better quickly, or something. The doctor listened to her description of symptoms, examined her and said she likely had a virus. The doctor suggested taking an over-the-counter pain reliever to manage symptoms, lots of fluids and rest. Morgan politely suggested, "What about an antibiotic?"

The doctor said, "Let's wait and see. If anything changes, such as your symptoms get worse and you feel more unwell, please arrange a follow up visit with me. As Morgan walked out of the clinic, she thought about the doctor's advice and said to herself: I can manage these symptoms and hopefully a day of rest at home will help me get better. I have a plan in case the symptoms persist or I feel worse."

"Wait and See" explained:

- Many common viral illnesses get better with time. Therefore, advice to "wait and see" prevents unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions.
- Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections. They do not improve symptoms caused by viruses.
- Healthcare providers prescribe medications with careful consideration. Drugs that cure infections are no exception.
- Patients too, don't want to take medications unnecessarily.

The process goes like this...

- The doctor determines whether or not a medication is a good fit for your symptoms. This is determined in part by what is going on in the community and sometimes by ordering and waiting for a urine, blood or x-ray test result.
- The doctor knows that many minor (but uncomfortable) viral illnesses will resolve on their own without a prescription, such as a cold, flu, ear ache, and sinusitis. They resolve with time—a few days to a week. Over-the-counter medications may relieve some of the symptoms.
- The doctor knows that prescribing an antibiotic for a viral infection will not improve that type of infection. Furthermore, the normal and good bacteria in anyone's body can be disrupted and contribute to the development of superbugs. Superbugs are resistant to commonly prescribed antibiotics and can lead to hard to cure infections. Superbugs have been created by unnecessary antibiotic prescribing.
- When patients do not follow directions for the prescription, or share their prescription with someone else, or don't finish the duration of the prescription, this also contributes to superbugs.
- Another version of "wait and see," is when the doctor does not have a clear picture of whether an antibiotic is needed, and shares the decision with the patient with these instructions, "If you feel worse and your symptoms don't improve, then fill this prescription."
- Advice to "Wait and See" leaves the patient in charge. Therefore, ask, "How long should I wait?" You know your body best. If you become increasingly ill and unable to function normally, you may require immediate and aggressive treatment in an ER. Don't wait. If the symptoms linger, seek further medical advice.

Resources

Wait and See. Wait-and-See Prescription for the Treatment of Acute Otitis Media: A Randomized Controlled Trial | Otolaryngology | JAMA | JAMA Network
How to Prescribe Fewer Unnecessary Antibiotics: Talking Points That Work with Patients and Their Families - Editorials - American Family Physician (aafp.org)
Get Ahead of Sepsis – Know the Risks. Spot the Signs. Act Fast. | Patient Safety | CDC
Reduce unnecessary antibiotic use: Preserving antibiotics now and in the future: Spotlight report 2019 - Canada.ca

Superbugs and antimicrobial resistance are serious public health threats facing the world. Do your part to keep these precious drugs working for years to come. Take antibiotics as prescribed and avoid unnecessary prescriptions.

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