Antibiotic Non-Use,
Why You Were Not Given One

You or your child was seen today. Your caregiver felt that the infection or problem was not one that would be helped with an antibiotic.

Infections may be caused by viruses or bacteria. Only a caregiver can tell which one of these is the likely cause of an illness. A cold is the most common cause of infection in both adults and children. A cold is a virus. **Antibiotic treatment will have no effect on a viral infection.** Viruses can lead to many lost days of work caring for sick children and many missed days of school. Children may catch as many as 10 “colds” or “flus” per year during which they can be tearful, cranky and uncomfortable. The goal of treating a virus is aimed at keeping the ill person comfortable.

Antibiotics are medications used to help the body fight bacterial infections. There are relatively few types of bacteria that cause infections but there are hundreds of viruses. While both viruses and bacteria cause infection they are very different types of germs. A viral infection will typically go away by itself within 7 to 10 days. Bacterial infections may spread or get worse without antibiotic treatment.

Examples of bacterial infections are:
- Sore throats (like strep throat or tonsillitis).
- Infection in the lung (pneumonia).
- Ear and skin infections.

Examples of viral infections are:
- Colds or flus.
- Most coughs and bronchitis.
- Sore throats not caused by Strep.
- Runny noses.

It is often best not to take an antibiotic when a viral infection is the cause of the problem. Antibiotics can kill off the helpful bacteria that we have inside our body and allow harmful bacteria to start growing. Antibiotics can cause side effects such as allergies, nausea, and diarrhea without helping to improve the symptoms of the viral infection. Additionally, repeated uses of antibiotics can cause bacteria inside of our body to become resistant. That resistance can be passed onto harmful bacterial. The next time you have an infection it may be harder to treat if antibiotics are used when they are not needed. Not treating with antibiotics allows our own immune system to develop and take care of infections more efficiently. Also, antibiotics will work better for us when they are prescribed for bacterial infections.

Treatments for a child that is ill may include:
- Give extra fluids throughout the day to stay hydrated.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Only give your child over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- The use of a cool mist humidifier may help stuffy noses.
- Cold medications if suggested by your caregiver.

Your caregiver may decide to start you on an antibiotic if:

- The problem you were seen for today continues for a longer length of time than expected.
- You develop a secondary bacterial infection.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF

- Fever lasts longer than 5 days.
- Symptoms continue to get worse after 5 – 7 days or become severe.
- Difficulty in breathing develops.
- Signs of dehydration develop (poor drinking, rare urinating, dark colored urine).
- Changes in behavior or worsening tiredness (listlessness or lethargy).

Document Released: 02/26/2003 Document Re-Released: 10/15/2010
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.