Antibiotics fight bacterial infections. They can cure many diseases that, in the past, would have made you very sick—maybe even killed you—like tuberculosis. Because antibiotics are so effective, some people want to use them for everything from the common cold to a toothache. But antibiotics don’t kill viruses, so they won’t help with the common cold, and not every toothache calls for an antibiotic (see “What Can Be Done When Your Tooth Hurts” below).

HELPING ANTIBIOTICS WORK
Not All Dental Infections Require Antibiotics
A toothache, for example, might be treated at the site of the infection in the dental office rather than having you take pills at home that won’t help fight the infection.

Use Only When Needed
Talk to your dentist or physician about your symptoms. A fever, for example, can mean that an infection has spread beyond the original site and may respond to antibiotics. An infection that has not spread might be able to be treated at the original site without disturbing the surrounding area.

Don’t Share Medications
Do not share your medicine with others. Antibiotics might not help them feel better, and side effects could occur (like a rash or diarrhea), which could make them feel worse. You should only take antibiotics on the recommendation of a health professional. He or she trained to recognize the signs of an infection that might not help them feel better, and side effects could occur (like a rash or diarrhea), which could make them feel worse. You should only take antibiotics on the recommendation of a health professional. He or she is trained to recognize the signs of an infection that

RISKS OF ANTIBIOTIC USE
Side Effects
Antibiotics can have side effects, including:

- Diarrhea, from short bouts lasting less than a day to more severe cases caused by Clostridioides difficile (or C. diff), which may require care in a hospital and could be deadly, especially for older adults
- Yeast infections
- Nausea or vomiting

Some people are allergic to certain antibiotics. They may develop a rash or have a more severe, even life-threatening reaction.

Antibiotic Resistance
When bacteria are antibiotic resistant, they are no longer killed by the antibiotics. This can occur naturally, as bacteria multiply on their own or as a result of being exposed to antibiotics. This can happen when you use antibiotics improperly (for example, taking antibiotics when not needed). When bacteria are resistant to antibiotics, they can grow quickly, causing illnesses that are difficult—sometimes impossible—to treat.

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria can spread from one person to another, affecting the whole community.

CONCLUSION
Antibiotics are helpful medications, and we must use them wisely to ensure that they will continue to work against bacterial infections.

Prepared by Anita M. Mark, senior scientific content specialist at the American Dental Association (ADA) Science & Research Institute in Chicago, IL. This article originally appeared in the November 2019 (Vol. 155, No. 11) issue of the Journal of the American Dental Association. Copyright © 2019 ADA. It is reprinted with permission.

WHAT CAN BE DONE WHEN YOUR TOOTH HURTS
Many things can cause pain when you bite down or eat or drink something hot or cold. Your tooth may even hurt when you do nothing at all! Causes of tooth pain include:

- Injuries
- Swelling of the tissues in or around your tooth
- Bacterial infections in or around the tooth

Injuries or swelling that cause pain without other symptoms may feel better if you take pain relievers (like aspirin or ibuprofen) or use hot or cold packs. In some cases, your dentist might recommend a root canal or other dental treatment.

Antibiotics, though, should only be taken when prescribed by a health professional. Fever, swollen glands, and extreme tiredness are signs that antibiotics might be the right choice.

ATTITUDES AND HABITS ESTABLISHED AT AN EARLY AGE
Attitudes and habits established at an early age are critical to maintaining good oral health throughout life. Dental decay is the single-most-common chronic childhood disease in the United States. But with good nutrition, proper care, and regular dental visits, children can maintain healthy mouths—and healthy smiles. To help promote the benefits of establishing good oral health habits at an early age, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) offers parents and caregivers these five tips:

1. Oral health care should start from day one. It is essential to begin oral health care as soon as your baby is born. Clean his or her gums gently with a clean gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding. Parents should brush their baby’s teeth gently with a soft-bristled toothbrush and a small amount of water as soon as the first tooth appears, typically between six months and one year.

2. Children’s teeth should be brushed for two minutes, at least twice a day. While it’s okay to let your child “take a turn,” parents or caregivers should do the actual brushing until the child’s manual dexterity is good enough to do an effective job in removing all plaque on the teeth. Use a fluoridated toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush (but don’t use fluoride toothpaste on a child until he or she can spit). There are toothbrushing apps available for your smartphone or tablet that can help keep kids motivated about brushing and ensure they brush for a full two minutes. Flossing also is necessary to remove food particles and plaque that build up between teeth, and it should occur as soon as the teeth are close together and any two are touching, which usually occurs by age four. Using a smooth-coated, mint-flavored floss will appeal more to young mouths.

3. Certain foods and drinks can affect children’s teeth more than others. Sticky candy and snacks like gummy worms, licorice, fruit snacks, and even raisins have a high sugar content and are the worst offenders when it comes to causing tooth decay, otherwise known as cavities. Excessive consumption of soda, juice, and sweetened sports drinks can also cause decay. Instead, children should drink water or milk. Drinking fluoridated water from the tap is especially helpful for preventing cavities because fluoride makes the outer surface of teeth more resistant to the acid attacks that cause tooth decay. Studies show that children who drink fluoridated water as their teeth grow will have stronger, more decay-resistant teeth over their lifetime.

4. Be mindful of the oral implications of pacifier use and thumb sucking. These are common habits and a normal, soothing reflex for babies and toddlers. Most children will stop sucking their thumb between the ages of two and four, and typically no harm is done to their teeth or jaws. However, some children who repeatedly suck on a finger or a pacifier for long periods of time may push their upper front teeth toward their lip or cause their front teeth to not come in properly. To encourage kids to stop, try positive measures, such as praising them or rewarding them with small, non-food goodies like stickers. Negative reinforcement or constant nagging by parents can have the opposite effect.

5. Regular dental visits will help avoid potential problems. Dental visits are very important to ensure that children’s teeth are coming in properly and do not show signs of decay. Children should visit the dentist for an examination and cleaning every six months to avoid potential problems. The American Dental Association, the Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and the American Academy of Pediatrics all recommend that a child’s first visit to the dentist should be six months after the eruption of the first tooth or by the age of one.

Visit massdental.org/baby-oral-health to download The Mouths of Babes brochure and visit the MDS YouTube channel (youtube.com/massdentalsociety) to view short, educational videos on first dental visits and children’s brushing and flossing.

FIVE TIPS to Improve Your Child’s Oral Health

What Can Be Done When Your Tooth Hurts

Using Antibiotics Wisely

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