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 is trained to recognize the signs of an infection that can be treated with this type of medicine.

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.