Caring for Your Child
Correct and Careful Use of Antibiotics

Antibiotics are powerful and important medicines. They can save lives. If they are not used properly, however, they can be harmful. It is important to understand about the correct use of antibiotics.

Germs make people sick. There are two main types of germs, bacteria and viruses. Viruses can cause coughs, sore throats, and colds. Antibiotics do not cure viruses. Viruses go away on their own in time. Bacteria are the germs that can be treated with antibiotics.

Antibiotics should only be used when a child has an illness caused by bacteria. If we give antibiotics to a child who does not need them, their system gets used to the antibiotics, and the medicine will not work for the child when he really needs it. When this happens, the doctors will need to prescribe stronger antibiotics that may need to be given through the child’s veins while the child is in the hospital. Eventually, no antibiotics may work for this child. When this happens, it means that the bacteria are resistant. The resistant bacteria can be spread to people in the family and community. They can become sick and learn that there is not medicine that will work for them. No one wants to see this happen.

What You Can Do:

Understand that antibiotics are often not needed to treat common childhood illnesses. Here are some guidelines:

- **Ear Infections**: There are a few types of ear infections. Most need antibiotics. Some do not.

- **Sinus Infections**: Thick or green mucus does not mean that a child has a sinus infection. If a child does have a sinus infection, antibiotics are only needed if it is a very serious infection, or if it lasts more than 10 days.

- **Coughs/Bronchitis**: A child rarely needs antibiotics for a cough or bronchitis.

- **Sore throat**: Most sore throats are caused by viruses. Strep throat must be treated with antibiotics. A doctor can only diagnose strep throat by wiping the throat with a cotton swab and having it tested in the lab.

- **Colds**: Viruses cause colds. They may last for 2 weeks or more. Antibiotics do not cure colds. If your child is uncomfortable, ask your doctor for ideas to make your child feel better.
Know that you cannot PREVENT a bacterial infection by taking antibiotics.

A viral illness can sometimes turn into a bacterial infection. If your child has a virus, and the illness gets worse, or lasts a long time, let the doctor know, and the treatment may change. Please remember that giving your child an antibiotic for a virus will not cure the virus and will not prevent a bacterial illness.

Remember that antibiotics are good medicines when used carefully and correctly. Unnecessary antibiotics can be harmful.

- Take them only for a bacterial infection.
- Make sure your child takes the medicine exactly as directed. He needs to finish the medicine even if he is feeling better. If he stops taking it too soon, some germs may survive and he may get sick again.
- Do not save antibiotics for future use.
- When your child is ill, always ask if the illness is from a bacteria or a virus. ONLY a bacterial illness should be treated with antibiotics.