

# good health report

WINTER 2014

YOUR FAST TRACK TO LIVING WELL

## Smart Use

A guide to antibiotics

## The Doctor Is In

Prepare for your appointment



Embrace better health.

## Good Health Report To Your Health



**W**hether you are new to AvMed, have been with us for the past year or so, or perhaps you are a longtime member—welcome! We are pleased and proud that you have chosen AvMed as your trusted health partner.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue and its focus on “embracing better health.” It is our priority to help you live healthier. Getting your annual flu shot is one way to embrace better health. The flu shot is free at your doctor’s office or participating AvMed pharmacy. And, when you’re visiting your doctor, remember to plan ahead to make the most of your appointments. We know your time is valuable so be sure to write down your concerns, list your symptoms and medicines, and note any changes in your health before you arrive at the doctor’s office.

We are here to help you stay connected and engaged in healthier living. If you have any questions or concerns, please call AvMed Member Services at the number listed on your AvMed ID card.

To your good health in the New Year!

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## 3 Lessons From KIDS

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Believe it not, kids can set a better health example than adults. Check out these three kid-favorite activities—and why they're good for us grown-ups!

❖ **SMILING** helps us handle the pressure:

Researchers at the University of Kansas put participants through stressful tasks and found that those who smiled had lower heart rates after the task than those who weren't smiling.

❖ **PLAYING** makes us happier: Enthusiastic play triggers endorphins, those feel-good chemicals that lift our spirits and distract us from things that might otherwise bring us down.

❖ **SLEEPING** fends off heart attack and stroke: Research presented at the American College of Cardiology found that those sleeping fewer than six hours a night were twice as likely as those sleeping six to eight hours to experience a stroke or heart attack and 60 percent more likely to have congestive heart failure.

## Take Diet Drinks Off The Menu

Cutting sugar drinks to save calories? Smart idea. Replacing them with sugar substitutes? Not so much.

In fact, if you're ditching the sweet sips in order to lose weight, you may be doing just the opposite. A recent study published in *Trends in Endocrinology and Metabolism* found that people who frequently used artificial sweeteners, like aspartame, sucralose and saccharin, were also at increased risk of excessive weight gain, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Nobody's sure why this is the case, but it may be that artificial sweeteners stoke your sweet tooth and set off cravings for you to binge on high-calorie foods later.

Next time, instead of reaching for a diet soda, make ice cubes out of grape or cranberry juice and melt them in your seltzer. Naturally sweet and full of antioxidants!



## What You Can Do

These tips can help make sure antibiotics will work when you need them:

- Always ask your doctor if antibiotics are the best treatment.
- Avoid pressuring your doctor into prescribing antibiotics when they won't help you feel better or cure your illness. Ask your doctor what else you can do to get relief.
- Do not use antibiotics that were prescribed for a different illness or to someone else. You may delay correct treatment and become sicker.
- Protect yourself from illnesses. Wash hands well with soap and running water.
- Get a flu vaccine and other vaccines when you need them.

If you do need an antibiotic, always take it exactly as directed and tell your doctor or pharmacist about other medicines or dietary supplements you are taking.

If you have questions about the appropriate use of antibiotics, please call your doctor or visit the Medical Encyclopedia on AvMed's Web Site at [avmed.org](http://avmed.org). You can select "My Account" then "My Health Tools."

# A Guide to Antibiotics

How to use these drugs wisely.

**A**ntibiotics are medicines that kill bacteria. Bacteria can cause infections such as strep throat, ear infections, urinary tract infections and sinus infections (sinusitis).

There are many types of antibiotics. Your doctor will decide which antibiotic will work best for your infection.

## DON'T ANTIBIOTICS CURE EVERYTHING?

Antibiotics are powerful medicines, but they cannot cure everything. Antibiotics do not work against illnesses that are caused by viruses. They **do not** help:

- Common colds
- Influenza (flu)
- Most cases of acute bronchitis
- Most sore throats not caused by strep
- Runny noses
- Most ear infections

These illnesses usually go away by themselves. Ask your doctor what you can do to feel better.

## WHY NOT TAKE ANTIBIOTICS JUST IN CASE?

If you take antibiotics when you do not need them, they may not work when you do need them. Each time you take antibiotics, you are more likely to have some bacteria that the medicine does not kill. These bacteria can change (mutate), making them harder to kill. Then, the antibiotics that used to kill them no longer work. These bacteria are called antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

These tougher bacteria can cause longer and more serious infections. To treat them you may need different, stronger antibiotics that have more side effects than the first medicine and may cost more.

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria also can spread to others. Your community then will be at risk of contracting infections that are harder to cure and cost more to treat. Some antibiotics that doctors prescribed in the past no longer work. Taking antibiotics you do not need will not help you feel better, cure your illness or keep others from catching your infection.



## Coping With COPD

Tips to stay well over the long term.

**D**o you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)? This group of lung diseases blocks airflow, making breathing difficult. The chronic condition can also cause coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness and other symptoms.

Measuring lung function is an important way to keep on top of the disease. Doctors do this through a test called, spirometry. The test is simple and non-invasive: You take a deep breath, then blow out as hard and as fast as you can into a mouthpiece connected to the machine. The spirometer then measures how much you exhaled in the first second, as well as the total amount exhaled.

COPD develops slowly, and symptoms often worsen over time. Although the disease can limit your ability to do routine activities, there are ways to cope.

- If you smoke, quit now. (See sidebar.) Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of COPD.
- Take your medicines as prescribed by your healthcare provider. They can include: bronchodilators, which relax the muscles around the breathing tubes; anti-inflammatories (or steroids), which reduce the swelling and mucus production inside the airways; and antibiotics, which can fight flare-ups caused by bacterial or viral infections.
- Oxygen therapy, which can help with shortness of breath, may be necessary if COPD is severe.

If you're facing a chronic illness such as COPD, talk to your doctor about your health. AvMed's Healthy Living Program can also offer support. Call **855-81-AVMED (28633)**.

Visit AvMed's Web Site for easy-to-follow methods for kicking the smoking habit at [avmed.org](http://avmed.org), under Healthy Living Programs.

## 2014 Resolution: QUIT!

Now is the time to quit smoking! Here are some ideas on how:

- Set a quit date and mark it in your calendar. Tell family and friends you're going to stop smoking. Get rid of your cigarettes, lighters and ashtrays.
- Nicotine replacement therapies can help ease the symptoms of withdrawal by supplying the body controlled amounts of nicotine, which get smaller and smaller as the body adjusts.
- Seek out a group program: Research university or hospital programs in your area, or try Nicotine Anonymous to help connect with a group near you. Visit [nicotine-anonymous.org](http://nicotine-anonymous.org) or [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov) for more resources.

# The Doctor Is In— Are You?

What to do  
before and  
during your visit.



**S**ure you're healthy. And to stay that way, you need to see your primary care physician every year. Here's what you need to know to make the most of your visit.

## BEFORE YOUR VISIT

- Compile a list of topics you want to cover, including any symptoms you might be having and what makes you feel better or worse.
- Create a health journal. Include any illnesses, injuries or hospitalizations you have now or have had in the past, any allergies you have and all the medicines you're taking. (See below for more on medications.)

## AT YOUR VISIT

- Bring a pen and paper to take notes.
- Don't wait until the end of the visit to bring up any issues. Ask your most important questions first. Be direct.

- Fess up. Let your doctor know if you smoke or drink alcohol. Cigarettes can change the way certain medicines work, and mixing alcohol with some meds can be dangerous. Also, fill the doctor in on anything going on in your personal life that may be affecting your mental health.
- Don't be afraid to pipe up if you're not following what the doctor says. Say, "Could you please repeat that, I'm not understanding," or "I don't understand the reasons behind your recommendation." If you still don't understand, ask to see a nurse or a physician's assistant.
- If your doctor dismisses your concerns, explain why you're anxious. Clueing your doctor into your family history (your grandmother had an early heart attack, your father battled cancer, etc.) will give some context, so the doctor can explain why you should (or shouldn't) be worried.

## Monitor Your Meds

Even if you've been on the same prescriptions for years, it's important to regularly review your medications with your doctor. You need to evaluate whether or not they're working correctly, and make sure they aren't interfering with one another. Your doctor may also have new information about your medicines, including any warnings that may have been introduced.

Before your annual review, jot down a list of the meds you're taking. Include not just prescription and over-the-counter drugs, but also vitamins and herbal remedies. Note the dosages, as well as any side effects.

# Stroke: A Hidden Danger

How to spot the signs.

**Y**ou often think of a stroke as something that happens to older folks, but a stroke can strike anyone at any time, regardless of age. In fact, an analysis published in *Neurology* found that overall, 15 percent of the most common types of strokes occur in young people and adolescents.

## WHAT IS STROKE?

Stroke is the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, and 795,000 people will suffer one this year. A stroke happens when a blood clot blocks an artery, or a blood vessel breaks, cutting off blood flow to an area of the brain. When either of these things happens, brain cells begin to die and brain damage occurs.

Keep your risk factors down by doing the following:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Keep blood pressure and cholesterol at normal levels
- Don't smoke
- Exercise regularly
- Keep diabetes in check
- Limit alcoholic drinks to one or two per day

## SPOT THE SIGNS

If you're experiencing symptoms of a stroke, time is crucial. The quicker you get help, the better your chance for a full recovery. If given within three hours of the first symptom, the right medication may reduce long-term disability for the most common type of stroke.

**FAST** is an easy acronym to remember the warning signs. Look for:

- FACE:** Does one side of your face droop when you smile?
- ARMS:** Does one arm drift downward when you lift both arms?
- SPEECH:** Is your speech slurred or strange?
- TIME:** If you notice any of these signs, call 911 immediately.

## The Best of B Vitamins

Did you get your Bs today? It's important that you do! The B vitamins—a group of water-soluble vitamins—activate a wide range of biochemical reactions that convert the fats, carbohydrates and amino acids in the foods you eat into energy your cells can use. The result is healthy blood cells, active muscles, glowing skin and more.

Recent studies also suggest that B vitamins may help reduce risk of stroke. These vitamins can be found in fish, poultry, meat, eggs, dairy products, leafy green vegetables, beans and peas. Many cereals and some breads are also fortified with B vitamins.



# Sleep Better Tonight

Tips to help you rejuvenate.

**D**id you get your eight hours last night? You should. A good night's sleep is critical for your health. Skimping on sleep can lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes and even early death.

For a more restful sleep, keep the following in mind:

- Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day (even on weekends and vacations).
- Keep your room dark, quiet and cool.
- Eliminate distractions in your bedroom (get rid of the TV and computer).
- Always sleep with the lights completely out—even a tiny amount of light can interfere with the production of the sleep hormone melatonin.
- Shut down all electronics at least one hour before bedtime. That includes your



phone! These gadgets emit light that disrupts the production of melatonin.

- Pick a non-electronic “wind down” routine for yourself every night and stick to it. Keep a book, crossword puzzle or something you love to do on your nightstand to remind you.

If you're tossing and turning enough that it interferes with your daily activities, or your sleep problems last for more than a month, it's time to see a professional. Call your doctor or a sleep expert.

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