

Watchful Waiting and Delayed Antibiotic Prescriptions

What is watchful waiting?

Watchful waiting is the practice of keeping an eye on symptoms to see if they improve with time. This is considered the best practice by most experts who treat sinus infections, earaches, severe colds, and coughs. They know that most people will get better on their own with over-the-counter (non prescription) medicines and will not need antibiotics.

In addition to watchful waiting, some patients who have a sinus or ear infection may get a prescription from their doctor for an antibiotic that can be filled at a later date if their symptoms don't start feeling better. This is called a **delayed antibiotic prescription**.



How is watchful waiting done?

If the doctor believes that you or your child doesn't need an antibiotic right away, they will ask you to do the following:

- **Closely track symptoms**, such as temperature, pain, cough, or stuffy nose (congestion), for several days. Note if they are getting worse, staying the same, or getting better.
- **Take the over-the-counter medicines** that your doctor recommends to help you or your child feel better while waiting. Make sure to rest and drink extra water.

Your doctor will tell you how long to watch and wait. If your symptoms haven't started to get better or if they are worse at the end of the watchful waiting period, then call your doctor for further instructions.

Or, if you have a delayed antibiotic prescription from your doctor, you can now fill the prescription at your pharmacy and start taking the antibiotics.

My Watchful Waiting

Have your doctor fill out the start date and end date of your "watchful waiting" period.

Start Date _____

End Date _____

If you or your child gets worse or hasn't improved by the end date of the "watchful waiting" period:

- Call your doctor for instructions:
_____ (Phone number)

OR

- Fill your delayed antibiotic prescription at your pharmacy and begin taking antibiotics.

When will my doctor choose watchful waiting?

Your doctor will decide based on your symptoms, how bad they are, and when they started. This information helps your doctor know if your infection is caused by a type of germ called a **virus**.

Because there isn't a simple lab test that can definitely show if a virus is causing these types of infections, your doctor will need to examine you. Even then, it's not always easy to tell.

If your doctor believes that your symptoms are caused by a virus, they will recommend that you use watchful waiting and may give you a delayed antibiotic prescription as a back-up in case your infection is caused by bacteria. Your doctor knows that:

- **Antibiotics only work on germs called bacteria.** They do not help you get better faster if you have a virus.
- **Your immune system is the only thing that will fight the viruses that cause sinus infections, colds, ear infections, and coughs.** However, over-the-counter medicines can help you feel better while your body is healing. Your doctor will help find the right combination for you or your child.

What are the benefits of watchful waiting?

Using antibiotics when they are not needed can do more harm than good. By doing watchful waiting and not overusing antibiotics, you will:

- Avoid the side effects that antibiotics can cause, such as allergic reactions and diarrhea.
- Help make the community safer, because the less antibiotics are used, the more likely they are to work when we really do need them!

When should I call my doctor?

During the watchful waiting time period, call the doctor right away if the patient has any of the following:

- New severe pain
- Rising temperature
- Chest pain
- Coughing up blood
- Difficulty breathing
- Confusion
- Severe drowsiness
- Shaking/chills

What are the risks of watchful waiting?

Watchful waiting is not recommended for people who have immune system problems or other specific diseases. There is a small risk that it may take slightly longer for you to get better.

Questions for my doctor

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