

Do I Still Need An Antibiotic Before I Visit the Dentist?

Infective endocarditis, or bacterial endocarditis, is an infection of the heart's valves and lining. It is caused when certain germs (bacteria) found on the skin or in the mouth enter into the blood and travel to the heart.

Many people with heart problems are used to taking an antibiotic before dental procedures or certain operations to prevent this heart infection. But, there are risks from using antibiotics...they can cause allergic reactions and when they are overused, they can stop working to kill certain bacteria. The American Heart Association, American Dental Association, and other organizations have found that only a small number of people are really likely to benefit from taking antibiotics to prevent infective endocarditis. This means that many patients will no longer take antibiotics before visiting their dentist.

In people with poor oral hygiene and dental disease, it's more likely that bacteria from the mouth will enter the blood. It turns out that most cases of infective endocarditis are probably caused by routine daily activities, like chewing food, brushing your teeth, and using toothpicks. So for most patients, just maintaining good oral hygiene, like regular brushing and flossing, and routine dental check-ups will help minimize the risk of getting a heart infection.

I have a heart problem. Should my doctor prescribe an antibiotic for me before a dental procedure?

If you have any of the following conditions, you should continue to take an antibiotic before dental procedures (even if you are only having your teeth cleaned) and before certain operations:

- an artificial heart valve
- a history of infective endocarditis
- certain specific, serious congenital (present from birth) heart conditions
- a heart transplant that develops a problem in a heart valve

On the other hand, if you have the following conditions, you no longer need to take an antibiotic to prevent a heart infection before dental procedures and certain operations (even if you have always taken an antibiotic before a trip to the dentist in the past):

- mitral valve prolapse
- rheumatic heart disease
- bicuspid valve disease
- calcified aortic stenosis
- congenital heart conditions, like ventricular septal defect, atrial septal defect, and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy

If an antibiotic is prescribed for me, when should I take it?

Usually, you will take one dose 30 minutes to 1 hour before your procedure. In some cases, if you already have an infection, the antibiotic you are taking to treat the infection will be all you need. Your doctor can let you know.