

## Preventing infections of the heart

This leaflet is about preventing an infection of the heart in people with heart conditions. The infection is called **infective endocarditis** (en-DOH-car-DI-tis). It explains how antibiotics can be used, how advice about using antibiotics has recently changed, and why keeping your mouth healthy is very important.

### Before reading this leaflet

Reading this leaflet with a family member or your carer may help you to better understand the information. Speak to your dentist or doctor if you do not understand anything mentioned in this leaflet.

### About infective endocarditis

Infective endocarditis is an infection of your heart valves or the lining of your heart. If untreated, it can cause serious illness or even death.

#### What causes it?

Infective endocarditis is caused by germs (bacteria) that enter the blood and settle on the heart valves.

These germs normally live in your mouth or on your body, but they can get into your blood in different ways and at different times. The germs can get into your blood during some types of dental work or surgery.

#### Who can get infective endocarditis?

Infective endocarditis is very rare, but is more common in people with damaged or artificial heart valves. Germs can more easily settle on damaged or artificial heart valves.

#### What are the symptoms of infective endocarditis?

Most people will feel tired, generally unwell, have aches and pains and develop a fever.

The symptoms can appear very quickly, but more commonly develop over weeks or months. Tell your doctor if you are worried about any symptoms you have.

Infective endocarditis can be diagnosed by an ultrasound of the heart (called an echocardiogram) and blood tests.

### Antibiotics

Antibiotics may be used before some dental work and surgery to help prevent infections like infective endocarditis. The advice about who should use antibiotics and when they should use them has recently changed.

#### How has the advice about antibiotics changed?

New advice about how antibiotics are used means that fewer people with heart conditions will get antibiotics before dental work or surgery. If you have taken antibiotics before dental work or surgery in the past, you may not need to take them next time.

Now, only people with **some** heart conditions need to take antibiotics before dental work or surgery. They will only need to take them before **some** types of dental work and surgery.

The advice changed because research shows that antibiotics are not always needed to prevent infective endocarditis.

Your dentist or doctor will be able to explain what the changes mean for you, and if you need to take antibiotics before any dental work or surgery.



## Who might need antibiotics?

If you have a heart condition listed in **Box 1** your dentist or doctor will prescribe antibiotics before you have some types of dental work or surgery. This is because people with these heart conditions are the most likely to become very ill if they get infective endocarditis.

### Box 1

**You will be prescribed antibiotics before some types of dental work or surgery if you have:**

- had your heart valves replaced
- had infective endocarditis before
- certain types of heart condition present from birth (congenital heart defects) — check with your doctor
- heart valve damage that happened after a heart transplant
- rheumatic heart disease, if you are an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander person.

Your dentist or doctor will be able to tell you if your heart condition appears on this list.

**Always tell your dentist or doctor if you have a heart condition, even if you think it is not listed in this box.** Make sure you tell them before having any treatment.

## When should antibiotics be used?

Antibiotics should only be used before the dental work or surgery that is most likely to allow germs into your blood. Some examples are listed in **Box 2**.

### Box 2

**Antibiotics might be used before:**

- deep cleaning of teeth
- a tooth or teeth is removed (extraction)
- mouth surgery
- making a cut (incision) in the airways, or taking a sample of tissue (biopsy) from the airways
- certain types of surgery involving the gut or urinary system.

These are examples. Antibiotics might need to be used before some other types of dental work and surgery. Ask your dentist or doctor for more information.

## Keeping your mouth healthy

You can reduce your risk of getting infective endocarditis by keeping your mouth healthy. To stop the germs that cause infective endocarditis sticking to your teeth:

- brush your teeth twice a day
- clean between your teeth once a day (for example, by using dental floss)
- visit your dentist twice a year for a check-up.

Your dentist can show you the best way to brush and clean between your teeth. Ask your dentist about other ways to keep your teeth and gums healthy.

## For more information

You can get more **information about infective endocarditis and antibiotics** from your dentist or doctor. You might want to ask the following questions:

- Do I need to take antibiotics to help prevent infective endocarditis?
- What types of dental work or surgery should I take antibiotics before, if any?
- Can you tell me more about the symptoms of infective endocarditis I should look out for?

For more **information about medicines** talk to your doctor, pharmacist or contact the NPS Medicines Line on 1300 888 763 (Mon–Fri 9am–6pm EST) and speak to a pharmacist. Local call rates apply (calls from mobiles may cost more).

This leaflet is endorsed by:



The Australian  
Dental Association Inc



The Cardiac Society of  
Australia and New Zealand

**Therapeutic  
Guidelines**

Therapeutic Guidelines Ltd

*This leaflet may be downloaded, printed, photocopied and distributed free of charge in its present form.*

November 2008

NPS is an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines,  
funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

ABN 61 082 034 393 | Level 7/418A Elizabeth Street Surry Hills NSW 2010 | PO Box 1147 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012  
Phone: 02 8217 8700 | Fax: 02 9211 7578 | email: [info@nps.org.au](mailto:info@nps.org.au) | web: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)