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Sore throat

Diagnosis

Your doctor will start with a physical exam that will include:

- Using a lighted instrument to look at the throat, and likely the ears and nasal passages
- Gently feeling (palpating) the neck to check for swollen glands (lymph nodes)
- Listening to your breathing with a stethoscope

Treatment

A sore throat caused by a viral infection usually lasts five to seven days and doesn't require medical treatment.

To ease pain and fever, many people turn to acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) or other mild pain relievers.

Never give aspirin to children or teenagers because it has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a rare but potentially life-threatening condition that causes swelling in the liver and brain.

Treating bacterial infections

If your sore throat is caused by a bacterial infection, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics.

You must take the full course of antibiotics as prescribed even if the symptoms are gone. Failure to take all of the medication as directed can result in the infection worsening or spreading to other parts of the body.

Not completing the full course of antibiotics to treat strep throat can increase the risk of rheumatic heart fever or serious kidney inflammation.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about what to do if you forget a dose.

Other treatments

If a sore throat is a symptom of a condition other than a viral or bacterial infection, other treatments will likely be considered depending on the diagnosis.

Lifestyle and home remedies

Regardless of the cause of your sore throat, these at-home care strategies can help you ease your symptoms:

- **Rest.** Get plenty of sleep. Rest your voice, too.
- **Drink fluids.** Fluids keep the throat moist and prevent dehydration. Avoid caffeine and alcohol, which can dehydrate you.
- **Try comforting foods and beverage.** Warm liquids — broth, caffeine-free tea or warm water with honey — and cold treats such as ice pops can soothe a sore throat.
- **Gargle with saltwater.** A saltwater gargle of 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon (1.25 to 2.50 milliliters) of table salt to 4 to 8 ounces (120 to 240 milliliters) of warm water can help soothe a sore throat. Gargle with the solution and then spit it out.
- **Humidify the air.** Use a cool-air humidifier to eliminate dry air that may further irritate a sore throat, being sure to clean the humidifier regularly so it doesn't grow mold or bacteria. Or sit for several minutes in a steamy bathroom.
- **Consider lozenges or hard candy.** Either can soothe a sore throat, but don't give them to children age 4 and younger because of choking risk.
- **Avoid irritants.** Keep your home free from cigarette smoke and cleaning products that can irritate the throat.

Alternative medicine

Although a number of alternative treatments are commonly used to soothe a sore throat, evidence is limited about what works. If you or your child needs an antibiotic for a bacterial infection, don't rely on alternative treatments alone.

Check with your doctor before using any herbal remedies, as they can interact with prescription medications and may not be safe for pregnant and breast-feeding women, and people with certain health conditions.

Herbal or alternative products for a sore throat are often packaged as teas, sprays or lozenges. Common alternative remedies include:

- Slippery elm
- Licorice root
- Marshmallow root

Preparing for your appointment

If you have a sore throat, make an appointment with your doctor. In some severe cases, you may be referred to a specialist in ear, nose and throat (ENT) disorders.

Here's some information to help you get ready for your appointment.

What you can do

Make a list of:

- **Symptoms you have**, and for how long
- **Key personal information**, such as recent contact with someone who was ill
- **All medications, vitamins or other supplements** you take, including dosage
- **Questions to ask** the doctor

For a sore throat, some basic questions to ask your doctor include:

- What's likely causing these symptoms?
- Are there other possible causes?
- What tests are needed?
- What treatment do you recommend?
- How soon do you expect symptoms to improve with treatment?
- How long will this be contagious? When is it safe to return to school or work?
- What self-care steps might help?

Don't hesitate to ask other questions.

What to expect from your doctor

Your doctor is likely to ask questions about you or your child. Your doctor might ask:

- Are there symptoms other than a sore throat?
- Have these symptoms included a fever? How high?
- Has there been difficulty breathing?
- Does anything worsen the sore throat, such as swallowing?
- Does anything seem to make the symptoms better?
- Has anyone else at home been ill?
- Is a sore throat a recurring problem?
- Do you smoke? Are you regularly exposed to secondhand smoke?