

Sore throat

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What is it?

A sore throat, also known as *pharyngitis*, refers to all acute or sudden infections of the throat or *pharynx*, including the *tonsils*. The fact that a person does or does not have his/her tonsils does not affect the chance that they will become infected, nor does it change the course of the illness. Throat involvement is part of most upper respiratory tract infections.

What causes it?

Most sore throats are caused by viruses and are part of a cold. *Tonsillitis* (temporary swelling, redness and pus on the tonsils) is usually present with any throat infection, viral or bacterial. The presence of tonsillitis does not have any special meaning. About 15-30% of sore throats in children, especially from 5 to 15 years of age, and 5-15% in adults are due to *Group A beta Streptococcus* bacteria ("strep" throat). Without treatment, a strep throat can have some rare but serious complications. Sometimes a severe strep infection is easy to diagnose, but other times it isn't. Throat cultures and other lab tests can be helpful in telling the difference between strep and viral infections.

Other causes of sore throat include *postnasal drip* from draining sinuses which triggers frequent throat clearing. Also *infectious mononucleosis* ("mono") causes fever, tiredness, swollen lymph nodes, and sometimes skin rash along with a sore throat.

People who sleep with their mouths open often wake in the morning with a dry mouth and sore throat. It clears within an hour of having something to drink. Use a humidifier to help prevent this problem.

Who gets it?

This disease is uncommon under one year of age. The rate of infection then increases to a peak from 5-15 years old, but continues throughout later childhood and into adult life.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms that accompany sore throat differ depending upon the cause. There is, however, much overlap of symptoms, which may make it difficult to distinguish one form of pharyngitis from another.

Viral pharyngitis is generally considered a disease of relatively slow onset, which usually has as early signs fever, fatigue, and decreased appetite with throat pain. Hoarseness, cough, and runny nose are also common. The entire illness may last less than 24 hours and usually does not persist more than 5 days.

Streptococcal pharyngitis in an individual over two years old often begins with a complaint of headache, abdominal pain, and vomiting. These symptoms are usually associated with a fever over 101F and occasionally as high as 104F, and swollen *lymph nodes* in the neck. Fever may continue for 1 to 4 days and in rare cases the person may remain ill for as long as two weeks. Usually the throat becomes red and the tonsils become enlarged with draining *pus*. Besides a severe sore throat, most often there are no other respiratory symptoms, including little if any cough or runny nose. In children that are too young to talk, a strep throat may be suspected if they refuse to eat or begin to cry during feedings.

How do you prevent it?

You can't. Sore throat is caused by viruses and bacteria which are found normally in some people's nose and mouth and are spread easily from person to person. Years ago it was thought that by removing the tonsils a person might not get sore throat. However, we now know that in the vast majority of cases this is not true and is not necessary.

Can it be treated?

For sore throats which are caused by viruses there is not specific treatment. However there are many things that can make a person feel more comfortable during the illness.

- **Stop smoking** and avoid smoky rooms since cigarette smoke paralyzes the body's own immune system which normally fights infection.

- **Gargling** with warm salt water (1/4 tsp salt per 4-ounce glass) offers some symptomatic relief for throat pain in adults and children old enough to cooperate. Do not swallow this mixture as it can make you vomit. You may gargle every 4 hours but make a fresh solution each time. In younger children the inhalation of steam occasionally produces similar effects.

- **Humidified air** at your bedside allows you to breathe moist air all night and often is soothing to the throat.

- **Cool liquids** such as juice, water, soda, Kool-Aid, or popsicles are usually more acceptable than solids or hot foods. No attempt should be made to force a child to eat.

- **Hard candy** (butterscotch seems to be a soothing flavor) can be used in adults and children over 4 years of age as often as necessary. You can avoid expensive throat sprays or throat lozenges. Not only are they no more effective than warm salt water or hard candy but also may contain an ingredient (benzocaine) that can cause a drug reaction.

- **Ibuprofen** is often helpful when throat pain is severe. You may also use them for fever over 101F.

- **Antibiotics** are given for *Streptococcal pharyngitis*, usually taken by mouth several times a day for 7-10 days. The most common reason for recurrent strep throat is not taking the entire prescription. Follow the instructions on your prescription closely, even if you are feeling better before all tablets are taken. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses and they can cause harm. They also make it difficult to find out what is wrong if you become sicker. You should avoid using leftover antibiotics from siblings or friends. These should be thrown out because they deteriorate faster than other medications.

- **Tonsillectomy** is considered usually when a person has frequent episodes of proven strep throat over time despite antibiotic treatment. This procedure can temporarily reduce the number of strep infections, but it can't eliminate them.

Are there complications?

With viral infections, the complication rate is low, although ear infections may occur. With strep throat, possible complications include; sinus infections, ear infections, and rarely meningitis. Years ago, kidney infection and *rheumatic fever* were common following strep throat.

Rheumatic fever is a serious complex illness that may include various combinations of fever, weakness,

swollen joints, strange-looking rash, and sometimes damage to a heart valve. Although rheumatic fever doesn't always occur when strep is missed or inadequately treated, sometimes it does. It's not worth taking a chance. Therefore even though an antibiotic may help you feel better right away, it is important to take the full course of antibiotics as prescribed. If you have any questions, ask your doctor.

Is strep throat contagious?

Yes. Be considerate of other people so as not to give strep to them. Strict hand washing and keeping hands away from the eyes, nose and mouth are the best ways to prevent spread of infection. Most children prefer to remain in bed during the early phase of disease anyway. If you have strep throat, you should stay home and away from others. After taking antibiotics for 24 hours, an individual is no longer contagious and can return to daycare, school or work if the fever is gone and he/she is feeling better.

In summary

- Most sore throats are caused by viruses.
- Many sore throats, including viral pharyngitis, can be treated supportively at home with warm water gargling, humidifier, and acetaminophen.
- If you or your child has fever, red tonsils with pus, swollen lymph nodes, and minimal cough, you may have strep throat.
- Strict hand washing is the best way to prevent spread of infection.
- Antibiotics treat strep throat, but are not helpful for other kinds of sore throat.
- Follow the treatment schedule prescribed by your doctor.
- Call your family physician if your child is drooling, spitting, having great difficulty swallowing, acting very sick, or if the fever lasts more than 3 to 4 days. For an adult, call if you notice any of the following warning symptoms; prolonged fever, recurrent vomiting or persistent headache more than a few days.
- For more information visit familydoctor.org

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