

Patient education: Sore throat in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

When should I see a doctor or nurse about a sore throat?

Most people do not need to see a doctor about a sore throat. It usually gets better on its own. But sore throat can sometimes be serious.

See a doctor or nurse if:

- You have a fever of at least 101°F or 38.4°C
- Your throat pain is severe within the first 2 days, or does not start to improve within 5 to 7 days

Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1) or go to the emergency room if you:

- Have trouble breathing
- Are drooling because you cannot swallow your saliva
- Have swelling of the neck or tongue
- Cannot move your neck or have trouble opening your mouth

What causes sore throat?

Sore throat is usually caused by an infection. Two types of germs can cause it: viruses and bacteria. People who have a sore throat caused by a virus do not usually need to see a doctor or nurse. People who have a sore throat caused by bacteria might need to see a doctor or nurse. They might have a type of infection called strep throat. Only about 1 in 10 adults who seek medical care for sore throat have strep throat.

How can I tell if my sore throat is caused by a virus or strep throat?

It is hard to tell the difference. But there are some clues to look for.

People who have a sore throat caused by a virus usually have other symptoms, such as:

- A runny nose
- A stuffed-up chest
- Itchy or red eyes
- Cough

People who have a sore throat caused by strep throat **do not** usually have a cough, runny nose, or itchy or red eyes. They might have been in close contact with another person who has strep throat. They might also have:

- Severe throat pain
- Fever (temperature higher than 100.4°F or 38°C)
- Swollen glands in the neck
- A rash

If you think you have strep throat, the doctor or nurse can check you for it easily. He or she can run a swab (Q-Tip) along the back of your throat and test it for the bacteria that cause strep throat.

Do I need antibiotics?

If you have an infection caused by a virus, you **do not** need antibiotics. But if you have strep throat, you should get antibiotics. Most people with strep throat get better without antibiotics, but doctors and nurses often prescribe them anyway. That's because antibiotics can prevent problems sometimes caused by strep throat. Plus, antibiotics can reduce the symptoms of strep throat and prevent its spread to other people.

What can I do to feel better?

If you want some relief from the pain of sore throat, you can take pain medicine that you can get without a prescription. Throat sprays are no better at soothing pain than sucking on cough drops or candy. Some people feel relief if they gargle with salt water.

When can I go back to work or school?

If you have strep throat, wait 1 day after starting antibiotics. By then you will be a lot less likely to spread the infection. If you do not have strep throat, you can go back as soon as you feel well.

What can I do to prevent getting a sore throat again?

Wash your hands often with soap and water. It is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of infection. You can use an alcohol rub instead, but make sure the hand rub gets everywhere on your hands.