

SORE THROAT (PHARYNGITIS)

Pharyngitis, more commonly known as "sore throat", is an inflammation of the tissues of the throat. It is often a complication of an upper respiratory infection (e.g., a cold) and is most often caused by a virus. It may also be caused by bacteria (including streptococci, or strep) or a fungus. It can occur at all ages but is most common in children 4-7 years of age. Pharyngitis is contagious. Risk increases in those with decreased resistance; diabetes; smoking; overuse of voice; excess alcohol intake; living or working in a dry, dusty place; and close quarters (e.g., school or day care).

Symptoms may include:

Symptoms that indicate a possible viral infection:

- Usually begin gradually and within 2 or 3 days of symptoms starting, it will peak then is usually gone within 24 hours
- Scratchy, ticklish, sore, and even painful throat
- Hoarseness, difficulty swallowing, lack of appetite or refusal to eat
- Cough, fever, runny nose

Symptoms that indicate a possible bacterial (e.g., Strep) infection:

- All of the above but with a fairly sudden onset of sore throat. A sore throat that lasts longer than 3-4 days could be due to a bacterial infection and must be treated by your doctor with prescription medicines.
- Stomach pain, nausea and vomiting, headache and generalized aches
- Fever that may be as high as 104 F and may last several days; other symptoms may last up to 2 weeks.
- There may be swollen glands in the neck, white patches in the throat, a red or grayish membrane covering the throat

What your doctor can do:

- Diagnose pharyngitis by asking about your symptoms and doing a physical exam.
- Diagnostic tests may include throat culture (using a swab to obtain a sample from the throat), rapid strep test, or laboratory blood tests for a complete blood count (CBC).

Treatment depends on the cause:

- Antibiotics or antifungal agents will be prescribed if a bacteria or fungus is the cause.
- Viral infections are self-limiting and symptoms can be treated at home. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses.

What you can do:

- If viral, sore throats usually last no more than 3 or 4 days. See your doctor if a sore throat lasts longer than this as it may be due to bacteria or fungus. The sore throat should start to feel better in 24-72 hours after starting an antibiotic. If not, contact your doctor.
- Continue to take the entire prescription even when you feel better. Do not take "leftover" antibiotics. Different antibiotics work on different infections. The wrong antibiotic or too little of the right one can allow an infection to get worse.
- Take non-prescription drugs like acetaminophen (Tylenol) for muscle aches and fever over 102° F. Discuss the use of ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) with your doctor before giving it to a child, especially if the infection may be caused by strep. Aspirin should not be given to a child for any viral illness as studies link its use with Reye's syndrome, a serious illness!
- For throat pain and scratchiness, non-prescription throat lozenges may be used. Try warm salt water (1 tsp salt in a glass of warm water) or double-strength tea (hot or cold) gargles. Give young children 1 tsp corn syrup to swallow instead. A liquid or soft diet may be needed for a few days if swallowing is painful. Soup can be comforting.

- A cool-mist humidifier in the bedroom increases moisture in the air and helps relieve the dry, tight feeling in the throat. If glands are swollen and tender, apply moist, warm soaks several times a day for 20-30 minutes.
- Throw out old toothbrushes so that germs are not passed on.
- Drink plenty of fluids, especially with fever.

What you can expect: You are no longer contagious after taking antibiotics for 24-48 hours. It is important to finish all of the medication prescribed to avoid complications. Complications may include epiglottitis, pneumonia, ear infection, sinusitis, and rhinitis. If caused by the strep bacteria, and not treated adequately, rheumatic heart or kidney disease may result.

Contact your doctor if pain is severe; if a rash develops; there is fever for more than 3 days; if drooling, or great difficulty swallowing; if difficulty breathing (not from stuffy nose); if feeling very ill; or if symptoms get worse or return with treatment.