



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CDC 24/7: Saving Lives. Protecting People. Saving Money through Prevention.

Sore Throat

Overview of a Sore Throat

A sore throat often makes it painful to swallow. A sore throat can also feel dry and scratchy. A sore throat is a frequent symptom of the common cold or other acute respiratory tract infections. In some cases, a lab test will need to be done to determine if you or your child needs antibiotics.

Causes of a Sore Throat


- Most sore throats are caused by viruses, like ones that cause a cold or the flu
- Some sore throats, like strep throat, are caused by bacteria; strep throat is caused by Group A streptococcus (strep-tuh-KOK-us)
- Other causes include:
 - Allergies
 - Dry air
 - Pollution (airborne chemicals or irritants)
 - Smoking or exposure to second hand smoke

Signs and Symptoms of a Viral Infection Accompanied by a Sore Throat

- Sneezing
- Cough
- Watery eyes
- Mild headache
- Mild body aches
- Runny nose
- Low-grade fever (less than 102°F)



See a Healthcare Provider if You or Your Child has:

- A sore throat that lasts longer than 1 week
- Difficulty swallowing or breathing
- Excessive drooling (young children)
- Temperature higher than 100.4° F
- Pus on the back of the throat
- Rash
- Hoarseness  lasting longer than 2 weeks
- Blood in saliva or phlegm
- Symptoms of dehydration (dry, sticky mouth, sleepiness or tiredness, thirst, decreased urination or fewer wet diapers, few or no tears when crying, muscle weakness, headache, dizziness or lightheadedness)

- Contact with someone with strep throat
- Recurring sore throats

Your healthcare provider can determine the cause of a sore throat and if treatment is needed. If your child is younger than three months of age and has a fever, it's important to always call your healthcare provider right away.



Antibiotics are Needed When...

Antibiotics are needed if a healthcare provider diagnoses you or your child with strep throat, which is caused by bacteria. Strep throat cannot be diagnosed by looking in the throat – a lab test must also be done. Antibiotics are prescribed for strep throat for the purpose of preventing rheumatic fever . If the test result shows strep throat, the infected patient should stay home from work, school, or day care until 24 hours after starting an antibiotic. For information about the bacteria that cause strep throat, visit [CDC's Group A Streptococcal \(strep-tuh-KOK-uhl\) \(GAS\) Disease website](#).

A healthcare provider may prescribe other medicine or give you tips to help with other symptoms like fever and cough, but antibiotics are not needed to treat most sore throats.

Antibiotics Will Not Help if...

When a sore throat is caused by a virus or irritation from the air, antibiotic treatment will not help it get better. Most sore throats will improve on their own within 1-2 weeks. It is important to take antibiotics only when they are needed. Taking antibiotics when they are not needed can be harmful.

Each time you or your child takes an antibiotic, the bacteria that normally live in the body (on the skin, in the intestine, in the mouth and nose, etc.) are more likely to become resistant to antibiotics. Common antibiotics cannot kill infections caused by these resistant germs. [Learn more about antibiotic resistance](#).



How to Feel Better


Rest, over-the-counter medicines and other self-care methods may help you or your child feel better. For more information about symptomatic relief, visit the [Symptom Relief](#) section of this website or talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist. Remember, always use over-the-counter products as directed. Many over-the-counter products are not recommended for children younger than certain ages.




Preventing a Sore Throat

- Practice good hand hygiene
- Avoid close contact with people who have colds or other upper respiratory infections
- Avoid smoking
- Avoid exposure to second hand smoke and do not expose children to second hand smoke

Related Pages

- [Hand Hygiene](#)
- [Ounce of Prevention-Kids](#) 
- [Group A Streptococcal \(GAS\) Disease](#)
- [Healthy Homes](#)



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