

Sore Throat: Easing the Pain of a Sore Throat

What causes sore throats?

Sore throats can be caused by many things. Viruses (like those that cause colds) can lead to a sore throat. Bacteria can also cause a sore throat, as can smoking, breathing polluted air, drinking alcohol, and hay fever and other allergies.

What is tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis means swelling of the tonsils (at the back of your mouth on each side of your throat). It can cause a sore throat and other symptoms. Signs of strep throat and tonsillitis are often alike (see the box below). Tonsillitis is usually caused by bacteria, though sometimes a virus may be involved.

Symptoms of tonsillitis or strep throat

- Sore throat
- Fever
- Headache
- Vomiting
- White patches in your throat or on your tonsils
- Pain when you swallow
- Swollen, red tonsils
- Sore glands in your jaw and throat

If I have tonsillitis, will I need a tonsillectomy?

Tonsillectomy is a surgery used to remove tonsils. Most people who have tonsillitis don't need a tonsillectomy. You might need a tonsillectomy if you get severe tonsillitis a lot or if your tonsils are too large and cause problems with your breathing. Your doctor can tell you if a tonsillectomy is needed.

What is strep throat?

Strep throat is caused by a type of bacteria called Streptococcus. The pain of strep throat often feels much like sore throats caused by other bacteria or by viruses. What's important and different about strep throat is that if it isn't treated it can sometimes result in rheumatic fever, which can damage the valves of the heart.

What is mononucleosis?

Mononucleosis (mono) is a viral infection caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. One of the main signs of mono is a sore throat that may last for 1 to 4 weeks. Other signs include swollen glands in your neck, armpits and groin, fever and chills, headache, and feeling tired.

What tests may be used to find the cause of my sore throat?

Your doctor may do a rapid strep test, a throat culture or both. A rapid strep test will give results fast--usually within about 15 minutes. But the test won't tell if your sore throat is caused by a bacterium other than Streptococcus or if it's caused by a virus. A throat culture takes longer--about 24 hours--but it's more accurate. If your doctor thinks you may have mono, he or she will probably do a blood test.

What is the treatment for a sore throat caused by bacteria?

If your sore throat is caused by Streptococcus, your family doctor will probably prescribe penicillin, taken by mouth for 10 days. Another antibiotic, called erythromycin, can be used if you're allergic to penicillin. If your sore throat is caused by a different bacteria, your doctor may prescribe another type of antibiotic.

What is the treatment for a sore throat caused by a virus?

Antibiotics don't work against viruses. Infections caused by viruses usually just have to run their course. Most symptoms caused by a cold-type virus go away in a week to 10 days.

Symptoms caused by mono can last for 4 weeks or more. If you have mono, your doctor will probably suggest that you get plenty of rest and that you not exercise too hard. You can take acetaminophen (brand name: Tylenol), ibuprofen (brand names: Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) or naproxen (brand name: Aleve) for the headache and other aches.

What about a sore throat that's caused by allergies?

If a sore throat is a symptom of hay fever or another allergy, your doctor can help you figure out how to avoid the things that trigger your allergies. Or you may need to take medicine for your allergies.

How can I avoid catching or passing a sore throat?

The best ways to avoid catching or passing the viruses and bacteria that can lead to a sore throat are to wash your hands regularly, avoid touching your eyes or mouth, and cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.

Easing the pain of a sore throat

- Take acetaminophen, ibuprofen or naproxen.
- Gargle with warm salt water (1 teaspoon of salt per glass of water).
- Suck on throat lozenges or hard candy.
- Suck on flavored frozen desserts (such as Popsicles).
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom or other rooms you spend lots of time in.
- Drink lots of liquids.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

