

My Throat Hurts!

Doctor word: Pharyngitis

Is it caused by a virus or bacteria? Most sore throats are due to VIRUSES, but other causes of sore throat include bacteria, allergies, frequent yelling or talking, smoking (including second-hand smoke), air pollution and indigestion.

Why do I feel like a leaky faucet? Your body fights viruses by trying to flush them out of your body. Mucus and fluid is made for this purpose. These extra fluids drain from your nose and sinuses and irritate the back of your throat causing a “sore throat” during these infections.

Can I just get a shot or take some antibiotics? It depends. Unfortunately, viruses are *not* killed by antibiotics. Your body will get rid of the virus on its own within 1-2 weeks. There is NO advantage to taking antibiotics if you have a viral infection. In fact, it can make you feel worse and create more powerful bacteria. Your health care provider can give you advice on medications you can take to relieve the symptoms, but you must wait out the infection.

Bacterial infections can be detected by your healthcare provider with a simple test. Strep throat is caused by bacteria. It is the most common bacterial cause of sore throat especially in children. This infection causes sore throat, fever, swollen glands in the back of the mouth and white pus in the throat. Strep throat can be treated with antibiotics, but it is important to take all of the pills even if the sore throat is better. The strongest bacteria can survive if you don't take the last few pills. Don't save antibiotics.

Other causes of sore throat can be treated by limiting or eliminating exposure to the cause. Allergies or indigestion may be able to be controlled with medications by asking your healthcare provider.

Only 15% of sore throats are caused by strep and need antibiotics! Most cases with strep-like symptoms are actually viral.

Can I avoid getting sore throats? YES. To prevent spread of viral or bacterial sore throats WASH YOUR HANDS. Germs usually enter your mouth, nose, eyes and ears by invisibly hitching a ride on your unclean hands. Use soap and water to wash your hands frequently, especially after using the restroom, before eating and after sneezing or coughing. Also, keep your body in top condition to fight off infections by drinking plenty of water, eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep. Also, don't smoke and avoid dust, pollen, ragweed, smoke, fumes and air pollution.

If you do get a sore throat drink plenty of fluids. Gargle with warm salty water. Use throat lozenges or vitamin C drops.

Contact the doctor if: you have trouble breathing or swallowing; you have been around someone with strep throat recently; your temperature is over 101°F and also have a rash; or do not think it is due to smoking, allergies, yelling, or a cold.



Infectious Disease Epidemiology

Adapted from Washington State Department of Health,
Louisiana Office of Public Health, and the CDC