

Sore Throat

What is a sore throat?

Sore throat (pharyngitis) is very common. It is usually caused by an infection in the throat. Soreness in the throat may be the only symptom. In addition, you may also have a hoarse voice, mild cough, fever, headache, feel sick, feel tired, and the glands in your neck may swell. It may be painful to swallow. The soreness typically gets worse over 2-3 days and then usually gradually goes within a week. In about 1 in 10 cases the soreness lasts longer than a week. You may also develop a sore throat if you have a cold or flu-like illness.

Tonsillitis is an infection of the tonsils at the back of the mouth. Symptoms are similar to a sore throat, but may be more severe. In particular, fever and generally feeling unwell tend to be worse. You may be able to see some pus which looks like white spots on the enlarged red tonsils.

What is the treatment for sore throat and tonsillitis?

- **Not treating** is an option as many throat infections are mild and soon get better.
- **Have plenty to drink.** It is tempting not to drink very much if it is painful to swallow. You may become mildly dehydrated if you don't drink much, particularly if you also have a fever. Mild dehydration can make headaches and tiredness much worse.
- **Paracetamol or Ibuprofen** ease pain, headache, and fever. To keep symptoms to a minimum it is best to take a dose at regular intervals as recommended on the packet of medication rather than 'now and then'.
- **Aspirin gargles** may ease the soreness. (There is little research evidence that confirms this. However, it is a popular treatment and may be worth a try). Dissolve some soluble aspirin in water and gargle for 3-4 minutes. You can do this 3-4 times a day. Spit out the aspirin after gargling.
Note: you should not give aspirin to children under 16.
- **Other gargles, lozenges, and sprays** that you can buy at pharmacies may help to soothe a sore throat. However, they do not shorten the illness.

Do I need an antibiotic?

Usually not. Most throat and tonsil infections are caused by viruses, although some are caused by bacteria. Antibiotics kill bacteria, but do not kill viruses. However, even if a bacterium is the cause, an antibiotic does not make much difference in most cases. Your immune system usually clears these infections within a few days whether caused by a virus or a bacterium. Also, antibiotics can sometimes cause side-effects such as diarrhoea, feeling sick, rash, and stomach upsets. Therefore, most doctors do not prescribe antibiotics for most cases of sore throat or tonsillitis.

An antibiotic may be advised if the infection is severe, if it is not easing after a few days, or if your immune system is not working properly (for example, if you have had your spleen removed, if you are taking chemotherapy, etc).

References

- [Sore throat - acute](#), Clinical Knowledge Summaries (April 2008)
- [Respiratory tract infections](#), NICE Clinical Guideline (July 2008); *Prescribing of antibiotics for self-limiting respiratory tract infections in adults and children in primary care*
- [Management of Sore Throat and Indications for Tonsillectomy](#), SIGN (1999)

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