

Sore Throats

You have an uncomplicated throat infection which hardly ever leads onto anything more serious. Your body will normally fight the infection effectively and heal itself in the very great majority of cases over the next 4 to 7 days.

9 in 10 sore throats nowadays are caused by viruses.

Antibiotics do not kill viruses (only bacteria) and that's why sore throats are not usually helped by taking antibiotics. Antibiotics also can have **side effects**. These are usually mild (allergy, skin rashes and diarrhoea). Occasionally the side effects can be severe. (For women on the oral contraceptive pill they will also reduce the effectiveness of the pill)

Thus, unless there is an additional specific reason, antibiotics are often not recommended for most sore throats since they may do more harm than good.

Management of your sore throat

If your throat is hurting you should gargle with soluble aspirin every 4 hours and then swallow it. Alternatively or additionally you can gargle (but not swallow) diluted TCP. Children under 16 can take paracetamol and suck soothing throat pastilles.

Please take up to the maximum dose recommended on the packet. This will help keep your throat more comfortable. If at work and you feel very unwell, you may need to take some time of work until you feel able to work again. You can 'self certificate' for up to 7 days.

However if in 3-4 days things are not improving or are much worse particularly if you have persistent fever and you would like to try the effect of the antibiotic then use the prescription you were given to hold 'in case'.

Nevertheless please do try to leave it 3-4 days as things are most likely to settle of their own accord.

NB For women on the pill: as antibiotics can interfere with the working of the pill you should take extra precautions (sheaths) during the antibiotic course and for 7 days after.

Flu and 'Chesty Coughs'

What causes flu and coughs?

Almost all coughs of all degree in children and adults are caused by virus infection. There are many different viruses that can infect the nose and throat. Coughing and sneezing the virus into the air pass them on. **An average primary school child has 6 to 8 coughs or colds per year.** A child may have several coughs or colds one after the other, particularly during winter. *A child who lives with smokers has an increased risk of developing coughs and colds.*

What are the symptoms of coughs and colds?

The common symptoms are a cough and a runny/stuffy nose. The cough is often worse at night. Coughing does not damage the lungs. A coughing child will not choke or stop breathing however bad it sounds. In addition adults and children may have: a raised temperature (fever), a sore throat, headache, tiredness, and be off their food. Sometimes children will vomit after a bout of coughing.

What are the treatments for coughs?

There is no magic cure for the majority of coughs, however bad they sound!! The symptoms tend to be worse in the first 4-5 days, and then usually ease gradually over the next few days. In general I find a most coughs have 4 phases

1. 1st week feeling unwell plus cough
2. 2nd week feel better but still coughing a lot
3. 3rd week of gradually declining cough
4. child catches another cold and the cycle repeats!!

An irritating cough may linger for up to **2-4 weeks** after other symptoms have gone. **Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so are of no use for common coughs and colds.** Treatment aims simply to ease symptoms until they go. The most useful treatments are:

- **Give yourself (or your child) plenty to drink.**
- **Give paracetamol (Calpol, Disprol, Tixymol, etc)**

to ease aches and pains, headaches, and fever. Ibuprofen is a useful alternative. You can also buy various other 'cold remedies' and 'cough mixtures' from pharmacies. There is little evidence that they do much good, but some people do find them useful.

See overleaf for a natural soothing honey and lemon drink.

Note: Some contain paracetamol, so be careful not to give more than the maximum dose of paracetamol if you are already giving yourself/your child paracetamol in a different form.

Another useful treatment for a bunged-up nose in a baby is to put a few drops of saline (salt water) into the nose just before feeds. This helps to clear the nose to make feeding easier. You can buy saline drops from pharmacies.

What symptoms should I look out for?

Most coughs and colds get better without complications **after 1 to 2 weeks**. Sometimes a more serious '*secondary*' bacterial infection develops subsequent to the initial virus infection. For example, an ear infection, chest infection, etc. Symptoms to look out for include: wheeziness, persistent earache, faster breathing, difficulty breathing, persistent high temperatures, drowsiness, chest pains.

See the doctor if symptoms become worse or you have a concern about your child. They may not be able to prescribe anything more effective for a common cough or cold, but a further check-over can be reassuring

Ear Pain and Antibiotics in Children

Ear pain in children will usually get better without the use of antibiotics. The collected evidence from studies performed in several different countries has shown that most children with simple ear pain from infections given simply Paracetamol suspension (such as Calpol) were better in a few days.

In fact 17 out of 20 children fully recovered without the use of an antibiotic.

In comparison if all 20 children took antibiotics **only one extra child got better over the same period.** At present there is no way of knowing which one of those 20 children given the antibiotics would benefit. Also when all 20 children were given antibiotics, at least one was likely to suffer side-effects as a consequence (such as a rash, diarrhoea or vomiting).

Antibiotics did not reduce pain in the first 24 hours and there was no difference in the likelihood of a further ear infection or hearing difficulty. In Holland antibiotics have not been used routinely for some years for ear infections; they seem to have less of a problem with antibiotic resistance than in the UK.

Change of Strategy

In view of the above evidence I have changed my strategy and I no longer advocate immediate antibiotics routinely for simple ear infections in children. I now recommend treatment with either Paracetamol suspension or Ibuprofen for the first 24 –48 hours. This will reduce pain and fever. The medicine should be given at full dose until the earache is gone.

If ear infection and pain persists more than 48 hours, or if your child is particularly unwell, then antibiotics can of course be reconsidered. You may have been given a prescription for antibiotic to use in this circumstance.

This will normally be discussed on an individual basis with you during your consultation with me.

Conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the thin 'skin' that covers the white part of the eyes and the inside of the eyelids. Infections and allergies are the commonest cause of conjunctivitis. The eyes look red, feel gritty and water more than usual. Vision is not affected

What causes infective conjunctivitis?

Virus infections which cause cold and most sore throats are the commonest cause of infectious conjunctivitis seen by a GP. A few are bacterial infections. Whatever the cause most bouts of infective conjunctivitis are not serious, and will soon clear. Very occasionally conjunctivitis can be more serious if the infection is caused by herpes viruses, or by a bug called chlamydia.

What is the treatment for infective conjunctivitis?

Most simple conjunctivitis will clear with or without treatment. Most conjunctivitis is caused by viruses that doctors cannot treat as viruses are not killed by antibiotic drops.

A recent study showed that even without specific treatment 83 children per 100 were better by day 7 and if antibiotic drops were used 86 per 100 had recovered by day 7. Hardly worth it!

So, not using any drops is a good approach for mild infections. Most infections will soon clear on their own without treatment. However If symptoms get do get worse or do not improve then use the prescription you have been given. Bathing the eyes with cool clean water can also be soothing.

See a doctor if any of the following occur.

Symptoms do not settle within a few days despite using the prescription if necessary.

Symptoms change (for example, light starts to hurt your eyes).

Pain becomes worse (mild soreness only is usual with conjunctivitis rather than pain)

Spots or blisters develop on the skin next to the eye.

Your vision becomes affected.

Nurseries and Conjunctivitis

Nursery policies can be somewhat unhelpful and illogical as most state children have to 'be on treatment' to be allowed back at the nursery. However most childhood conjunctivitis is caused by virus infection for which antibiotics have no effect – and clear up just as quickly on their own and will not prevent infection spread.

The Government Health Protection Agency website (www.hpa.org.uk) is very clear on this issue and states:

Is it necessary to keep my child away from school or nursery? *Exclusion of single cases from school/nursery is not generally necessary. It may be necessary if an outbreak occurs.*

A Traditional natural Honey and Lemon drink for coughs and colds

- Boil a whole lemon in water for 10 – 15 minutes till it becomes softened.
- After the lemon has cooled somewhat then squeeze it to extract its juice.
- Filter the juice to remove any fibres etc
- Add 30 ml (2 tablespoonful) glycerin to the Lemon juice before adding honey. (the glycerin can be omitted if you wish)
- Stir the lemon juice and glycerin into approximately half a cup of honey (about 60 ml).
- Take 1 **tablespoon** 4 – 8 times a day.