

# Student Health Centre

Sore Throat



## Introduction

A sore throat, also known as pharyngitis, is normally a symptom of a bacterial or viral infection, such as the common cold. In around a third of cases, no cause for the sore throat can be found.

## Symptoms



### Symptoms and signs of a sore throat include:

- \*swollen tonsils (two small glands found at the back of your throat, behind the tongue)
- \*enlarged and tender glands in your neck
- \*a painful, tender feeling at the back of your throat
- \*discomfort when swallowing

If you have a sore throat, you may also experience a number of other symptoms that are associated with common infectious conditions, such as:

**a high temperature (fever) of 38C (100.4F) or over - aching muscles - a headache - tiredness - a cough - a runny nose**

These other symptoms will depend on what infection is causing your sore throat.



### Outlook

Most sore throats are not serious and pass within three to seven days without the need for medical treatment. After a week, 85% of people will find that their symptoms have been resolved. Over-the-counter painkillers, such as paracetamol, can usually relieve the symptoms of a sore throat without the need to see a GP.

## When to visit your GP?

Make an appointment to see your GP if:

- your symptoms do not improve after two weeks
- you have frequent sore throats that do not respond to painkillers, such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin
- you have a persistent fever, a temperature that is above 38C (100.4F) which medication does not reduce.

### Tonsillitis

The main symptom of tonsillitis is a sore throat. Other common symptoms include:

- red and swollen tonsils, pain when swallowing,
- high temperature (fever) over 38°C (100.4°F),
- coughing, headache, tiredness,
- pain in your ears or neck,
- white pus-filled spots on your tonsils, and
- swollen lymph nodes (glands) in your neck.

**Tonsillitis is most commonly caused by a virus, but it can also be caused by bacteria.**

### Viral tonsillitis

The viruses that cause tonsillitis are often the ones that frequently affect the respiratory (breathing) system. They include the flu virus, parainfluenza virus (which causes laryngitis and croup.)

**Bacterial tonsillitis**

Bacterial tonsillitis may be caused by a number of different bacteria, but is usually caused by group A streptococcus bacteria.

**Treating tonsillitis**

Whether your tonsillitis is caused by a virus or bacteria, it is likely that your immune system will clear the infection within a few days. In the meantime, there are a number of things that you can do to help yourself or your child.

Make sure you have plenty to eat and drink, even if you find it painful to swallow. Being hungry and dehydrated can make other symptoms, such as headaches and tiredness, worse.

Treatments, such as painkillers and antibiotics (in cases of bacterial tonsillitis), may help to ease your symptoms. If your symptoms are particularly severe and you have recurring bouts of tonsillitis, surgery may be an option.

**Painkillers, lozenges and throat sprays**

You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen to ease symptoms such as pain, headaches and fever. When taking medication, always follow the instructions on the packet to ensure that you are taking the correct dose at the right time intervals. Do not take ibuprofen if you have a history of stomach ulcers, indigestion, asthma or kidney disease.

**Antibiotics**

As most cases of tonsillitis are caused by a virus, they do not respond to antibiotics. Antibiotics can be used to treat bacterial tonsillitis. They may be prescribed if your tonsillitis gets worse over time or if you have had a high temperature for a long time. Studies have shown that antibiotics can reduce illness time by about a day. Antibiotics sometimes cause mild side effects, such as an upset stomach, diarrhoea or a rash.

**Surgery**

If you have recurring bouts of tonsillitis (five or more episodes in a year) or it is severe enough to interfere with your everyday life, your GP may suggest removing your tonsils. This is done in an operation known as a tonsillectomy.