Education

Sore Throat

What is a sore throat?

Sore throat is a common symptom that ranges in severity from just a sense of scratchiness to severe pain.

Pharyngitis is the medical term for sore throat.

How does it occur?

Sore throat is caused by inflammation of the throat (pharynx). The pharynx is the area behind the tonsils. A sore throat may be the first symptom of usually mild illnesses such as a cold or the flu or of more severe illnesses such as mononucleosis or scarlet fever.

A sore throat that comes on suddenly is called acute pharyngitis. It can be caused by bacteria or viruses. A sore throat that lasts for a long time is called chronic pharyngitis. It occurs when a respiratory, sinus, or mouth infection spreads to the throat.

Sore throats can also be caused by:

- hay fever
- cigarette smoking or secondhand smoke
- breathing heavily polluted air or chemical fumes
- swallowing sharp foods that hurt the lining of the throat, such as a tortilla chip
- dry air
- heartburn (gastric reflux).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- a raw feeling in the throat that makes breathing, swallowing, and speaking painful
- redness of the throat
- fever
- hoarseness
- pus in your throat
- tender, swollen glands in your neck
- earache (you may feel pain in your ears even though the problem is in your throat).

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and examine your throat. Your provider also will examine you for signs of other illness, such as sinus, chest, or ear infections.

Just by looking at your throat, it is often hard for your health care provider to decide whether a virus or bacteria are causing your sore throat. Your provider may swab your throat to test for strep infection.

How is it treated?

Usually no specific medical treatment is needed if a virus is causing the sore throat. The throat most often gets better on its own within 5 to 7 days. Antibiotic medicine does not cure viral pharyngitis.

For acute pharyngitis caused by bacteria, your health care provider may prescribe an antibiotic.

For chronic pharyngitis, your provider will look for other causes.

How long will the effects last?

Viral pharyngitis often goes away in 5 to 7 days.

If you have bacterial pharyngitis, you will feel better after you have taken antibiotics for 2 to 3 days. You must, though, take all of your antibiotic even when you are feeling better. If you don't take all of it, your sore throat could come back.

How can I take care of myself?

- Do not smoke.
- Avoid secondhand smoke and other air pollutants.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to add moisture to the air.
- Get plenty of rest.
- You may want to rest your throat by talking less and eating a diet that is mostly liquid or soft for a day or two.
- Nonprescription throat lozenges and mouthwashes should help relieve the soreness.
- Gargling with warm saltwater and drinking warm liquids may help. (You can make a saltwater solution by adding a half teaspoon of salt to 8 ounces of warm water.)
- A nonprescription pain reliever such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen may ease general aches and pains. Children under 18 years of age should not take aspirin or products containing salicylate (such as Pepto-Bismol) because of the risk of Reye's syndrome unless recommended by a health care provider.

If your sore throat lasts for more then a few days, call your health care provider.

How can I prevent a sore throat?

The following suggestions may help prevent a sore throat:

- Don't share eating and drinking utensils with others.
- Wash your hands often.
- Don't let your nose or mouth touch public telephones or drinking fountains.
- Avoid close contact with other people who have a sore throat.
- Stay indoors as much as possible on high-pollution days.
- Don't stay in areas where there is heavy smoke from cigarettes.
- Use a humidifier in your home if the air is quite dry.

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