Tonsillitis and pharyngitis

WHAT ARE TONSILLITIS AND PHARYNGITIS?

Tonsillitis is an infection of the tonsils, which are masses of lymphoid tissue on either side of the back of the throat. The tonsils are a small part of the immune system, which protects and helps the body to fight infections.

Tonsillitis is very common and can occur at any age; however, it is most common in children and young adults.

Pharyngitis is an infection of the throat.

WHAT CAUSES TONSILLITIS AND PHARYNGITIS?

Tonsillitis and pharyngitis are mostly caused by viruses and, less commonly, by bacteria. Often a viral infection occurs, and this is followed by a bacterial infection. The most common type of bacteria involved is streptococcus (also known as 'strep' throat).

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Tonsillitis or pharyngitis may cause:

- a sore throat and neck
- pain when swallowing
- fever (a body temperature over 37.5°C for adults and over 38°C in children)
- a loss of appetite and feeling generally 'unwell'
- red and swollen tonsils (with or without pus) or an inflamed throat
- swollen and tender lymph nodes at either side of the neck
- a change in the sound of the voice (such as sounding 'hoarse' or muffled).

TREATMENT

Your treatment will depend on how severe your symptoms are and whether your doctor suspects a bacterial or viral infection. Simply looking at the tonsils does not always reveal the cause.

A blood test can confirm glandular fever. Sometimes a throat swab (sterile cotton wool on a stick that is gently rubbed over the tonsils) may be taken to test for bacteria.

If you have an infection caused by bacteria you may be given antibiotics. It is important to finish the course of antibiotics the doctor prescribes even if you feel better after a few days. If you have an infection caused by a virus, antibiotics **will not** help.

In some cases a dose of corticosteroids (by tablet or injection) may be recommended. Evidence suggests that this may help reduce pain for some people.

HOME CARE

Some general measures may help you recover:

- For adults, ibuprofen is recommended for pain. For pregnant women or other people who can not take non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), paracetamol is the preferred option. Check the label for the correct dose.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat soft, cool foods (such as jelly and ice-cream).
- Have fluids (such as soup, diluted juice or water) in small amounts and often.

- Gargle with warm salt water to relieve a sore throat. Make sure to spit the salt water out afterwards. Adults can use soluble aspirin or paracetamol gargle.
- Throat sprays and lozenges (such as Difflam or Strepsils) and mouthwash may help and are available from pharmacies. Ask your pharmacist for more information.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- Many people improve in the first day or two. Nine out of 10 people will be better in a week.
- A collection of pus around one tonsil (called a quinsy) may form in some people. This causes severe pain on one side of the throat and can make it difficult to swallow and even breathe. Antibiotics can help, but minor surgery may be needed to drain the pus.
- Make sure that any course of antibiotics is finished. If the full course is not taken, this can lead to further problems.
- Surgery to remove the tonsils (a tonsillectomy) may be needed due to tonsillitis but only after repeated or severe infections.

PREVENTION

Unfortunately this is hard to do. Viruses and bacteria easily spread from person to person from coughs, sneezes and infected fluids from the nose and throat. People can pass on infections before they first show signs of being sick until some days after the symptoms start.

There is no immunisation to prevent tonsillitis or pharyngitis.

You can try to avoid the infection spreading by:

- keeping yourself away from others while unwell
- washing your hands often
- keeping the sick person's eating and drinking utensils separate from others
- not sharing toothbrushes
- avoiding close contact such as kissing a person with tonsillitis or pharyngitis.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – **Dial nine one one (911)**

Do this if you or your child:

- are dribbling or cannot swallow saliva or liquids
- are having difficulty breathing.

See your local doctor or healthcare professional if you:

- have a high fever
- have increasing pain despite taking medication
- have pain on one side of the throat
- are worried for any other reason.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email **emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au**

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

© State of Victoria, Australia, Safer Care Victoria, May 2019

ISBN 978-1-76069-846-1 (pdf/online/MS word)

VICTORIA State Government

Also available online at www.safercare.vic.gov.au