

Patient information from BMJ

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Sore throat

Sore throats are very common and usually clear up on their own within a few days. They can be painful, but most people recover quickly. In the meantime, there are things you can do at home to make yourself feel more comfortable.

Sometimes a sore throat doesn't go away by itself, and you will need to see a doctor. You can use this information to talk to your pharmacist or doctor about which treatments are best for you or your child.

What is a sore throat?

Sore throats are common and are often part of another illness, such as a cold. You might also hear a sore throat called **pharyngitis**. 'Pharynx' is another word for the throat.

There are many possible causes for a sore throat. The most common cause is a virus, such as the common cold or flu. Some viruses can cause very severe sore throats. For example, glandular fever (also called infectious mononucleosis) is caused by a virus.

Sore throats can also be caused by bacteria. When this happens, it's usually due to *Streptococcus*. A sore throat caused by this bacteria is called **strep throat**. Other types of bacteria can also cause a sore throat, but these are less common.

Fungal infections can also cause a sore throat. The most common type is oral thrush, which is caused by a type of fungus called *Candida*.

This information is about sore throats caused by the common cold and *Streptococcus*.

What are the symptoms of a sore throat?

Common symptoms of a sore throat and other related symptoms may include:

- Pain at the back of the throat, which may feel worse when swallowing
- Redness or white patches at the back of the throat
- Very tender or swollen glands in the neck
- Painful sinuses
- A cough with mucus

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- Headache
- A temperature of more than 38°C (101°F).

Most sore throats aren't serious. In most cases, these symptoms will improve on their own with simple care at home. If you or your child's symptoms do not improve after a week, you should speak to a doctor.

Sore throats can sometimes be a sign of more serious illness. You should speak to a doctor straight away if you or your child has:

- Difficulty swallowing or breathing
- Blood in saliva or phlegm
- Excessive drooling (in young children)
- Signs of dehydration (such as very little urine or dry mouth)
- Joint swelling and pain
- Rash
- A temperature of 38°C (101°F) or higher in infants under 3 months old
- A temperature of 39°C (102°F) or higher in infants 3-6 months old
- A very high temperature, feeling very hot or cold, shivering, or a high temperature that lasts more than 5 days.

What are the treatment options for a sore throat?

Most sore throats get better on their own within a few days. In the meantime, there are several things you can do at home to help you feel more comfortable.

Home treatments to relieve a sore throat

There are some simple things you can do yourself to help soothe a sore throat, including:

- **Take over-the-counter painkillers** such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. These medicines come as tablets, or as chewable tablets or syrups, which are easier for children to take.
- **Gargle with warm, salty water.** Children should not try this.
- **Suck throat lozenges or use anaesthetic sprays.** These work by soothing or numbing the back of your throat. Do not give lozenges to young children because of the risk of choking.

Aspirin is another painkiller which might help, but do not give aspirin to children or teenagers. This is because it can very occasionally cause a condition called Reye's syndrome, which affects the brain and liver. Aspirin and ibuprofen can also irritate the stomach, and can cause ulcers and bleeding in some people.

It is important to be careful with medicines for sore throats. Many 'cold and flu' medicines contain paracetamol, so be careful if you or your child are taking more than one medicine at a time. Taking too much paracetamol is dangerous, because it can damage the liver. It's a good

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idea to talk to a pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns about which medicine is best for you or your child.

Antibiotic treatment for strep throat

Doctors might do some tests to find out if you have strep throat. These tests involve gently rubbing a cotton swab on the back of your throat. If you test positive for strep throat, your doctor will recommend antibiotics. Antibiotics kill bacteria so they work against strep throat.

Some test results can take a few days. If your doctor thinks you probably have strep throat, they may give you antibiotics before the results are back.

Antibiotics are usually taken as tablets, but syrups are available for children. You'll usually need to take these for 5-10 days.

If you don't start to feel better within 3 days of starting antibiotics, you should tell your doctor.

It's very important to take the antibiotics for the number of days your doctor tells you to, even if you start feeling better. If you stop taking them too early, some bacteria may survive and begin to grow again. This means your infection could come back and be more difficult to treat.

Antibiotics can have side effects. The most common are nausea (feeling sick), vomiting, or diarrhoea. Some people get a rash, which could suggest a mild allergic reaction. Talk to your doctor if you get a rash or any other side effects. If you're allergic to any antibiotics, such as penicillin, you should also tell your doctor.

Taking antibiotics for strep throat often helps you feel better within a day. They can prevent the infection from causing problems like ear infections, throat abscesses, and (in rare cases) rheumatic fever. Antibiotics also help stop the infection from spreading to other people.

What happens next?

Sore throats usually clear up on their own in a few days, and complications are very rare. Sometimes the infection that causes a sore throat can lead to problems such as hoarseness or loss of voice, an ear infection, or a sinus infection. If you think you have an ear or sinus infection, see your doctor.

As sore throats are very common, you are likely to get another one in the future. This is particularly the case for children. However, if you or your child keep getting sore throats, you should see a doctor.

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