

Sore throats can be uncomfortable, but they usually improve with a few simple self-care steps. Low humidity in your home, winter dryness, tobacco smoke or failure to drink enough fluids can be the cause. But sometimes a sore throat is a sign of infection.

Two types of infections cause sore throats. One is the more common viral infection. The other is less common, but more serious: the bacterial infection known as *strep throat*.

This brochure gives you information about strep throat. It includes common symptoms, diagnosis and care for sore throats and advice for when to call your doctor.

Facts about strep throat

- Strep season is usually February through April.
- Ninety percent of strep cases occur in patients aged 5 years to 15 years.
- Park Nicollet Clinic does approximately 50,000 strep screens each year. Only 20 percent to 30 percent are positive for strep.
- Not everyone exposed to strep becomes infected with strep.
- People exposed to strep do not need a strep screen unless they have strep symptoms.
- After a person is exposed to strep, it takes one to four days to develop strep symptoms.
- Viral infections cause most sore throats.

Your chance of having strep

The following symptoms typically are present with strep throat:

- Sore throat
- Very red throat with white spots
- Enlarged neck glands
- Fever above 101°F or higher

If you have all four symptoms and no cough or runny nose, you have a high risk (50 to 75 percent) for strep. **If you have one or two symptoms and no cough**, you have a moderate risk (less than 50 percent) for strep.

A significant cough and runny nose greatly reduces the likelihood that strep is the cause of your sore throat. It's much more likely that a virus is the cause, for example, for a cold. Clinicians do not recommend testing for strep in the presence of cold symptoms.

Rapid strep test

Depending on your symptoms, your clinician may have you do a rapid strep test to see if you have a strep throat infection.

If the rapid strep test is negative for the strep bacteria, you probably do not have a strep throat infection and your doctor will not give you an antibiotic. Antibiotics are only effective for treating bacterial infections. Because colds (and most sore throats) are viral infections, no medicines will cure or shorten their length.

You also will have a strep throat culture in addition to the rapid strep test. Occasionally, this test is positive for strep when the rapid strep test is negative. It takes about 24 hours for the results of the strep culture to be available. Your clinic will call you only if the test is positive. Meanwhile, use the self-care steps listed on the back of this brochure to ease the soreness in your throat.

If the rapid strep test is positive, your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic medication. Although many antibiotics have been shown to work, penicillin remains the preferred choice for patients of all ages who aren't allergic. *It is important to take all of your medication to prevent possible complications.* You should begin to feel better about a day after you start taking your medication. It is easy to spread the strep bacteria to other people. For this reason, stay home until you have taken the medication for 24 hours.

Self-care for sore throats

Here are some home treatments to soothe either a viral or bacterial sore throat:

- **Gargle with warm salt water every couple of hours.** Use 1/4 teaspoon of table salt in an 8-ounce glass of water. This helps lessen the irritation that is causing your throat to feel sore.
- **Suck on popsicles or other frozen desserts.** They feel good on the throat and help you get enough liquids. Older children and adults also can suck on throat lozenges (cough drops), hard candy or ice and gargle with ice water.
- **Drink more liquids.** Make sure you are drinking 8 glasses to 10 glasses each day. Juice and water are best. Warm liquids are soothing to the back of your throat.
- **Use acetaminophen (non-aspirin) or ibuprofen for fever or aches.** *Do not* use aspirin with children under 18 years because it may increase their risk of Reye's syndrome. Adults may take aspirin. Acetaminophen includes Tylenol®. Ibuprofen includes Motrin® or Advil®.
- **Get extra rest.** Rest helps your body rid itself of the virus or bacteria that is causing the infection.

When to call your clinic

Call your clinic if one or more of the following occur:

- Your sore throat continues for more than five days to seven days.
- Your fever gets higher.
- It becomes more painful to swallow.
- Your throat still feels very sore and you still have a fever after being on medication for two complete days.
- You have concerns regarding your lab results.

Call to see your doctor immediately if:

- it is hard for you to breathe.
- you develop a severe headache.

Call your clinic if you have strep and other members of your family or household develop the same sore throat symptoms. They may also need to be evaluated.

If you want more information on any medical topic, please contact the Park Nicollet Health Library. A medical librarian can help you find out what you need to know.

Web site: parknicollet.com/healthlibrary

E-mail: library@parknicollet.com

Phone: 952-993-5011

This brochure is based on guidelines developed by a team of health care experts at the Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement (ICSI), of which Park Nicollet Health Services is an active member. It will be reviewed and updated regularly as scientific evidence changes. This material is for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

What You Need to Know About Strep Throat