

## Sore Throat

### What causes a sore throat?

Sore throat (your doctor may call it pharyngitis - fair-en-jy-tis) can be caused by many things:

- viruses (such as the one that causes the common cold)
- bacteria (such as the one that causes strep throat, see below)
- mucus draining from your sinuses to your throat
- irritation from cigarette smoke, polluted air or alcohol
- hay fever or other allergies

### How do I know what's causing my sore throat?

Most sore throats are caused by viruses. Sometimes it can be difficult to know if the sore throat is caused by something else because symptoms are all similar. Your doctor often can tell this by an examination.

Sometimes tests are needed to be sure that the sore throat is not caused by a bacteria germ called Streptococcus or just plain "Strep". In this case, the doctor will take a throat swab. If the swab is sent for a throat culture, it may take a day or two to get the result—but it's very accurate. Sometimes, the swab may be tested differently (with a rapid strep test) for a quicker result.

### What is the treatment for a sore throat?

Most sore throats are caused by viruses, and the body's immune system will clear the infection. Antibiotics do **NOT** work against viruses and can be harmful if you use them when you don't need them.

If the sore throat is caused by the Streptococcus bacteria, your doctor will probably prescribe an antibiotic such as penicillin. It is important to take ALL of the medication because, in *very rare* situations, the streptococcus can result in serious illnesses (such as rheumatic fever). By completing the antibiotic medicine, you can help to avoid any serious complications and help prevent the bacteria from coming back.

### What can relieve the sore throat symptoms?

There are many things that can help the throat feel better until the infection has cleared:

- Take a pain reliever such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®). Children **should not take** aspirin/ASA.
- Gargle with warm salt water (one teaspoon in a large glass of water).
- Suck on popsicles, throat lozenges, or low-sugar hard candy.
- Drink cool fluids and eat soft foods.
- Use a humidifier.

Adapted from:

Sore Throat. Ask Your Family Doctor. Developed by the College of Family Physicians of Canada  
[www.cfpc.ca/programs/education/pated/Sore\\_throat.asp](http://www.cfpc.ca/programs/education/pated/Sore_throat.asp)

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[www.familydoctor.org/x2232.xml](http://www.familydoctor.org/x2232.xml)

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