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## What causes sore throats?

A sore throat is a symptom, not a disease. A sore throat may be the result of a bacterial or viral infection or it may be irritation of the throat caused by smoking, excessive loud talking, excessively dry weather, or the result of secretions from the nose draining down the throat in association with a cold or allergy.

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## Diagnosis

Of the sore throats that occur as a result of an infection, only 10% are a result of bacteria. The remaining 90% of cases are due to a virus. If the source of the sore throat is the result of a viral infection of an outside irritant (i.e., smoke from cigarettes), antibiotics will not eliminate it. The virus must run its course or the irritant must be removed.

If the sore throat is a result of bacterial infection (i.e., strep throat), antibiotic can be used to help get rid of it. A bacterial infection may be suspected by a medical provider and a throat culture may be performed. To perform a throat culture, a medical provider swabs your throat and a laboratory analysis of this specimen is performed. Throat culture tests require 24-48 hours before results are available. There is also a rapid strip test that can be performed that only detects Group A strep, results are available in 30-45 minutes. The Groups A and C Streptococcus ("strep"), gonorrhea or diphtheria (rare) all cause bacterial infections that could cause a sore throat. If you recently had oral sex, be sure to tell your medical provider so that a special throat culture for gonorrhea can be performed.

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## Should I be on medication?

Antibiotics help to speed recovery from strep or gonorrhea, but the sore throat and swollen lymph glands from other causes must resolve on their own. Over-the counter/non-prescription remedies like throat lozenges, sprays or hot tea may help with discomfort.

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## What about Strep Throat?

"*Strep throat*" is a bacterial infection caused by the streptococcus bacteria. It is almost always treated with antibiotics. The illness affects the throat and tonsils and is characterized by a sore throat, fever, chills, body aches, swollen tonsils and lymph nodes (glands) in the neck.

*Scarlet Fever* is a form of strep throat that is associated with a rash. Strep infections frequently occur in children and are primarily spread by droplets of moisture sprayed from the nose and mouth of infected individuals when they sneeze, through direct contact with infected individuals or carriers who may not have symptoms, or rarely indirectly through objects such as toothbrushes.

A very rare complication of Group A strep is *Rheumatic Fever*, which occurs if the infection is not treated within 9 days of onset of symptoms.

Although the clinical picture may suggest strep, a culture may be taken before initiating treatment. A commonly used treatment is penicillin. If your medical provider prescribes an antibiotic, it is important that you take the entire treatment prescribed, even if your throat feels better.

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## What about "Mono"?

Sore throats can be due to infectious mononucleosis (i.e., mono). If your provider suspects this he or she may order a blood test. However, sometimes symptoms may have to be present for a week before the test confirms the infection.

Mononucleosis is a viral infection caused by a type of herpes virus (Epstein-Barr virus or EBV). It is sometimes referred to as the "kissing disease" because its spread is often associated with kissing and other salivary contact, but actually it is only mildly infectious. The disorder is commonly found in adolescents and young adults. The virus is present in the saliva of people for a long time after initial infection.

Mononucleosis is often characterized by period of increasing fatigue, fever and a sore throat (similar to tonsillitis) that lasts for approximately 7 to 10 days. It is quite common to have enlargement of the lymph nodes in the neck and other areas such as the armpits and groin. Often, the spleen also becomes enlarged. There may also be a faint, pink rash over the body. Some people with mono find that they are fatigued for several weeks after the sore throat goes away.

## Treatment

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1. Drink a lot of fluids, particularly warm ones.
2. Gargle a solution of ¼ tsp. salt in an eight-ounce glass of warm water every 1-2 hours during the day to help soothe the throat and wash away mucus.
3. Suck on lozenges or hard candy and/or chew gum to help ease the pain.
4. Get plenty of rest.
5. Avoid inhalation or irritants, smoking, or use of the voice.
6. Inhale moderately warm steam in the shower or from a vaporizer. This helps soothe a dry and/or raw throat.
7. Take acetaminophen (Tylenol), aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Nuprin), or naproxen (Aleve) to help relieve pain and fever.
8. Complete any course of prescribed antibiotics even though you may feel better. This will help to prevent a relapse of a bacterial sore throat.

Most self-care remedies for sore throats help with discomfort and the throat tends to heal on its own. Should symptoms persist to get worst and include more ailments like fever, severe difficulty swallowing or breathing, see a medical provider as soon as possible.

## When to See a Clinician

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If you are experiencing the following symptoms see your healthcare provider for an evaluation:

- Your sore throat lasts over a week
- You are having reoccurring sore throats
- There is pus on the back of your throat
- You are having difficulty breathing/swallowing

## For More Information:

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