

Sore Throat

Most sore throats (pharyngitis) in children are caused by viruses, like those responsible for the common cold. Unless a specific cause such as infection with “strep” (streptococcal pharyngitis) bacteria is identified, sore throats usually clear up without treatment. Infection of the tonsils is common in children with sore throats. Surgery to remove the tonsils (tonsillectomy) is performed only if infections become very frequent or for other specific reasons.

What are pharyngitis and tonsillitis?

Pharyngitis and tonsillitis are infections of the throat (pharynx) or tonsils (lymph glands at the back of the throat). Often both the throat and tonsils are infected. The infections can be caused by viruses or bacteria, resulting in painful sore throats.

Most sore throats clear up with no need for treatment. The main exception is *strep throat* (streptococcal pharyngitis), which requires antibiotic treatment to prevent complications. An examination and simple tests can tell whether or not your child has strep throat.

What do they look like?

Sore throats are very common in children. They are one of the main reasons for visits to the doctor’s office. Symptoms include:

- Throat pain, ranging from mild to severe.
- Difficulty swallowing, sometimes with the feeling of a “lump” in the throat.
- Fever.
- Additional cold symptoms, such as fever, runny nose, sneezing, achiness.
- At times, swollen glands in the neck.

What causes pharyngitis and tonsillitis?

Sore throats are a common symptom of respiratory infections, including the same viruses that cause the common cold. Sore throats caused by viruses are likely to begin gradually and to occur along with typical symptoms of a cold, such as runny nose and cough.

Some sore throats are strep throat, which is infection with a specific type of bacteria. Some of the features of strep throat include:

- Sore throat comes on suddenly.

- Few symptoms of cough or cold.
- Swollen and tender glands in the neck.
- Headache and abdominal pain.
- Tonsils appear swollen and red, sometimes with visible pus.
- Distinct rash of scarlet fever. This a fine, red, rough-feeling rash, like sandpaper. Just because your child has scarlet fever doesn’t necessarily mean the strep throat is more severe.

What are some possible complications of pharyngitis and tonsillitis?

- Most sore throats are caused by viruses and get better in a few days. Complications are unusual.
- Strep throat can cause a disease called *rheumatic fever*, which can lead to heart damage. *Proper treatment for strep throat prevents rheumatic fever.*
- Strep throat may lead to a kidney problem (glomerulonephritis). Most children recover completely.
- Occasionally, an abscess may develop in the tonsils, throat, or neck.
- The glands (lymph nodes) in the neck may become infected with bacteria, becoming red and very tender. This is called *cervical adenitis*.
- Pharyngitis and tonsillitis can become recurrent or chronic problems. If your child has very frequent, fairly severe episodes of tonsillitis, we may suggest that your child be evaluated to see if surgery to remove the tonsils (tonsillectomy) would be helpful.

What places your child at risk of pharyngitis and tonsillitis?

The viruses and bacteria that cause sore throats spread from person to person. These infections occur most commonly in winter and spring.

How are pharyngitis and tonsillitis treated?

- Unless your child has strep throat, controlling pain and drinking enough liquids to prevent dehydration are all the treatment needed. Your child’s sore throat should start to get better within a few days.
- We probably not prescribe an antibiotic for your child because antibiotics are not effective against viruses, the most common cause of pharyngitis. If your doctor

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suspects infection with strep bacteria and office tests are positive, your child will be given antibiotics.

- Make sure your child drinks plenty of liquids. Avoid orange juice or other acidic drinks, which may irritate the throat.
- Use pain relievers (such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen) to reduce the discomfort of sore throat, headache, or muscle aches.
- For older children, gargling with warm salt water may help the throat feel better. Anesthetic sprays and lozenges may also be helpful.
- Tonsillectomy is usually considered only if tonsillitis becomes a frequent or problem.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child's sore throat doesn't get better after 4 or 5 days, if your child's sore throat gets worse, or if he or she develops new symptoms, such as:

- Difficulty opening his or her mouth.
- Drooling.
- Large swelling or redness of the glands (lymph nodes) in the neck.
- Difficulty breathing.
- A very muffled voice.