

Let's Talk About...

Strep Throat

Strep throat, (short for Streptococcus) is a throat infection caused by Streptococcus bacteria. A child with strep throat should receive antibiotics. If a child does not receive antibiotics, they could get more serious problems like rheumatic (roo-MAT-ik) fever. Rheumatic fever causes a person's joints, heart valves, kidneys or other tissues to swell. Fortunately, these problems are very rare.

Most sore throats are not strep throat. They happen when a child has a cold or flu (a virus). Throat soreness can also be caused by an allergy, dry air, pollution, smoking, or second-hand smoke. These types of sore throat are usually painful and annoying but only last 2–4 days. Most go away on their own, and the child does not need antibiotics.

A person with strep throat can spread the bacteria when they cough, sneeze, or touch another person. The bacteria is in the mucus in the nose and throat. Sometime between 12 hours and 5 days after being exposed to the bacteria, the child can feel ill with strep throat. A sore throat caused by strep can be a mild tickle or very painful, especially when swallowing. Children often have a fever (100.4°F, 38°C or higher), headache, stomachache, and sore, swollen lymph nodes (glands) in the neck. If a child with strep throat does not receive antibiotics, the child can feel uncomfortable for about 2–5 days. If the child receives antibiotics, the illness lasts about 1–3 days.

How to tell if a child has strep throat and how do you treat it?

Your child's doctor or healthcare provider will perform a test called a throat culture or rapid strep test. This will determine if your child has strep throat. It is OK to wait to treat the infection for 1 or 2 days while waiting for the test results.

Waiting 1 or 2 days does not increase the risk of complications. If the test result shows strep throat, your child should stay home from school or day care for 24 hours after starting the antibiotic medicine.

If your child has strep throat, the healthcare provider will order an antibiotic. The antibiotic, usually penicillin, can be taken by mouth (pill or liquid) or given as a shot. Your child must take the antibiotic pills or liquid for a full 10 days. This will prevent your child from getting another infection or complications. It is very important that your child takes the antibiotic as prescribed for the correct number of days, even if they get better right away.

Do not give your child antibiotics that are not prescribed for them. Antibiotics will not help if a sore throat is from a virus, allergy, or irritation from the air. Most sore throats will improve on their own within 1–2 weeks. Taking antibiotics when they are not needed can be harmful. Each time your child takes an antibiotic, the bacteria that normally live in the body (for example, on the skin, in the intestine, in the mouth and nose) are more likely to become resistant to antibiotics. Common antibiotics are not able to kill resistant bacteria.

How can I help my child be more comfortable?

You can give your child acetaminophen (Tylenol®) for aches, pains, or fever. Remember, always use over-the-counter products as directed. Many of them are not recommended for children younger than a certain age so check the label.

During the first days of your child's illness, they should avoid spicy foods and strongly flavored or acidic juices (for example orange juice). These can make throat pain worse. Encourage your child to drink liquids even if they do not want to eat. Cool drinks or Popsicles® may help relieve their throat pain.

Older children can gargle with warm salt water (1 teaspoon of table salt in 1 cup of water). They can drink tea with honey.

Special Note about Aspirin:

If your child has chickenpox or influenza (flu), do not give them aspirin, or any medicine that contains aspirin (read the labels). This is because aspirin in these illnesses may cause a serious disease called Reye's syndrome. It is hard to tell if your child has the flu, so talk to your doctor before you give your child aspirin for any illness.

When can my child go back to school or daycare?

Your child can return to school or daycare 24 hours after starting antibiotics, if they have a normal temperature.

How can I help my child prevent sore throats?

- Always practice good handwashing.
 - 1 Scrub your hands with soap and warm running water for 10–15 seconds.
 - 2 Rinse well after scrubbing.
 - 3 Use a paper towel to turn off the faucet. This will keep you from picking up viruses or bacteria from the faucet.
 - 4 If your hands are not visibly soiled, you can use antimicrobial hand sanitizer instead of washing.
- Avoid contact with people who have colds or other lung infections.
- Avoid smoking, and do not expose children to second-hand smoke.

In the past, tonsillectomy [ton-suh-lek-tuh-mee], a surgery to remove the tonsils, was tried in children who had many episodes of strep throat. This surgery was done to try to prevent more infections. Today this surgery is not recommended for most children who get strep throat repeatedly. It is usually better to treat strep throat with antibiotics and not surgery, even if the child gets strep throat a lot. A child can get strep throat even after a tonsillectomy.

What should I do if my child has problems?

If your child has these problems, take them to the nearest hospital right away:

- Trouble swallowing or breathing
- Drooling all the time
- Their lips look blue

If your child has these problems, call your child's doctor or healthcare provider right away:

- A fever over 104°F (40°C)
- Not drinking enough liquids
- Trouble opening the mouth
- Extreme weakness

If your child has these problems, call your child's doctor or healthcare provider during regular office hours:

- Your child has an earache
- Your child has very tender, swollen, or red neck glands
- Your child has a fever or illness that lasts more than five days
- Someone else in the family has a sore throat

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