

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

STREP THROAT**WHAT IS IT?**

Strep throat is a bacterial infection caused by *group A beta-hemolytic streptococcus* (*Streptococcus pyogenes*). Only 5-10% of sore throats evaluated by healthcare providers are due to strep throat. Most sore throats are caused by viral infections, which will resolve on their own without specific treatment.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Strep throat usually presents with sudden onset sore throat and fever (100°F or higher). The sore throat may be more painful than one caused by a virus but not always.

- ❖ It is unlikely that your sore throat is due to strep if you have any of these:
 - Sore throat for more than a week.
 - Other cold symptoms, like a cough or runny nose.
- ❖ Other common signs and symptoms of strep throat include:
 - Red swollen tonsils.
 - White patches of pus (exudates) on the tonsils.
 - Swollen glands in the front of the neck.
 - Headache, muscle aches.
 - Fatigue.
- ❖ Less common symptoms include the following (and are more likely to occur in children):
 - Stomach pain, nausea/vomiting.
 - Scarlet fever: a sandpapery red rash that starts in the armpits and groin, then spreads to the trunk, followed by the arms and legs (but the palms and soles are usually spared). Skin peeling is common.

IS IT CONTAGIOUS?

Yes! Strep throat, like all other respiratory infections, is spread through respiratory droplets sprayed into the air by coughing, sneezing, and talking. These infectious particles can also be transmitted to objects, like door knobs, sink handles, and cell phones.

To decrease the spread of infection to others:

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If a tissue is not available, use your elbow or sleeve.
- Wash your hands frequently, especially after coughing or sneezing. It is important to lather with soap for at least 15-30 seconds (about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday To You") before rinsing thoroughly.
- An alcohol-based hand sanitizer is an effective alternative to soap if your hands are not visibly soiled.
- Do not share food, beverages, or eating utensils with others.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

If your symptoms and physical exam findings are suspicious for strep throat, your medical provider will order a rapid strep test. Material from the back of the throat is obtained using a swab, and the results are ready in several minutes. There is a relatively small percentage of false negative results with the rapid strep test.

If the diagnosis is unclear, another throat sample may be sent to the lab for a throat culture. This test identifies the specific bacteria causing the infection and takes a few days to come back.

IS IT A SERIOUS CONDITION?

Strep throat itself is not a serious condition. The infection will usually resolve without treatment within 2-5 days. Complications are rare but can include:

- Ear infections.
- Sinusitis.
- Peritonsillar abscess: a collection of pus around the tonsils which requires immediate medical attention.
- Scarlet fever: a sandpappy red rash that generally occurs with the sore throat. Having scarlet fever may increase the risk of developing acute rheumatic fever later.
- Acute rheumatic fever: a serious condition that affects the heart, joints, nervous system, and skin. Symptoms usually occur 2-3 weeks after the sore throat develops.
- Glomerulonephritis: an inflammatory condition of the kidneys primarily seen in children. Symptoms typically develop 1-3 weeks after the sore throat. Most patients recover fully; however, long-term kidney problems may occur in some cases.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

- ❖ **Antibiotics** are used to cure strep throat. They lead to a faster recovery, decrease the risk of complications, and reduce the spread of infection to others.
 - The treatment of choice is penicillin taken by mouth for 10 days. If you are allergic to penicillin, another antibiotic will be prescribed.
 - You should feel significantly better 48-72 hours after starting the antibiotic.
 - It is important to finish the entire course of antibiotics to prevent serious complications, such as rheumatic fever.
 - You are considered contagious until 24 hours after starting the antibiotic.
 - It's also a good idea to replace your toothbrush after being on the antibiotic for 24 hours.
- ❖ **Self-Care Measures**
 - Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) may be taken for fever and pain. Take ibuprofen with food to prevent an upset stomach. Avoid aspirin use due to the risk of developing a serious condition called Reye's syndrome.
 - Throat lozenges may help decrease pain and moisten the throat. Lozenges may be more effective than sprays or gargles since they last longer in the throat.
 - Gargling with salt water (1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of salt in 8 ounces of warm water) several times a day may be helpful.
 - Drink plenty of non-caffeinated fluids. You may prefer warm drinks (like chicken soup and honey or lemon tea) or cold beverages.
 - Cold foods, like frozen yogurt, ice cream, and popsicles, may also be soothing.
 - Eat soft foods, such as applesauce, mashed potatoes, yogurt, and soft-boiled eggs.
 - Stay away from spicy or acidic foods.
 - Avoid smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke.

NOTIFY YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU EXPERIENCE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Sore throat that is not improving 3-4 days after starting an antibiotic.
- Difficulty opening your mouth.
- Drooling because you cannot swallow.
- A muffled "hot potato" voice.
- Fevers (101°F or higher) not responding to acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- Worsening lymph node swelling or neck pain.
- Body rash.
- Shortness of breath.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES: www.familydoctor.org, www.mayoclinic.org