

[Return to Web version](#)

## Sore Throat

### What causes sore throats?

Many things can cause sore throat. Viruses (such as those that cause colds and mononucleosis) can lead to a sore throat. Bacteria (such as those that cause strep throat) can also cause a sore throat, as can smoking, breathing polluted air and allergies to pet dander, pollens and molds.

[Return to top](#)

### What is tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis is when the tonsils (at the back of your mouth on each side of your throat) become infected by bacteria or a virus. It causes the tonsils to swell and can cause a sore throat and other symptoms. Signs of strep throat and tonsillitis are often alike (see the box below).

[Return to top](#)

### If I have tonsillitis, will I need a tonsillectomy?

Tonsillectomy is a surgery that removes the tonsils. Most people who have tonsillitis don't need a tonsillectomy. You might need a tonsillectomy if you get severe tonsillitis often or if your tonsils are too large and cause problems with your breathing. Your doctor can tell you if a tonsillectomy is needed.

[Return to top](#)

### What is strep throat?

Strep throat is caused by a type of bacteria called streptococcus. The pain of strep throat often feels much like sore throats caused by other bacteria or by viruses. What's important and different about strep throat is that if it isn't treated it can sometimes result in kidney inflammation or rheumatic fever. Rheumatic fever can lead to a rash, inflamed joints and, in severe cases, damage to the valves of the heart.

[Return to top](#)

### Symptoms of tonsillitis and strep throat

- Sore throat
- Fever
- Headache
- White patches in your throat or on your tonsils
- Pain when you swallow
- Red and swollen tonsils

- Swollen, sore glands in your jaw and throat
- Abdominal pain (usually in children)
- Vomiting (usually in children who have strep throat)

[Return to top](#)

## What is mononucleosis?

[Mononucleosis](#) (mono) is a viral infection caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. One of the main signs of mono is a sore throat that may last for 1 to 4 weeks. Other symptoms include swollen glands in your neck and armpits, fever, headache and feeling tired.

[Return to top](#)

## What tests may be used to find the cause of my sore throat?

Your doctor may do a rapid strep test, a throat culture or both. A rapid strep test will give results fast--usually within about 15 minutes. But the test won't tell if your sore throat is caused by a bacterium other than Streptococcus or if it's caused by a virus. A throat culture takes longer--between 24 and 48 hours--but it's more accurate. If your doctor thinks you may have mono, he or she will probably do a blood test.

[Return to top](#)

## What is the treatment for a sore throat caused by bacteria?

If your sore throat is caused by bacteria, your family doctor will probably prescribe an antibiotic. You will most likely begin to feel better in a few days, but it is very important to take all the antibiotics your doctor prescribes. This reduces the risk that your sore throat will return and also helps prevent [antibiotic resistance](#).

[Return to top](#)

## What is the treatment for a sore throat caused by a virus?

Antibiotics don't work against viruses. Infections caused by viruses usually just have to run their course. Most symptoms caused by a cold-type virus go away in a week to 10 days.

Symptoms caused by mono can last for 4 weeks or more. If you have mono, your doctor will probably suggest that you get plenty of rest and that you not exercise too hard. You can take acetaminophen (one brand name: Tylenol), ibuprofen (some brand names: Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) or naproxen (one brand name: Aleve) for the sore throat, headache and fever. Children should not take aspirin. Aspirin can cause a serious illness called Reye's syndrome when it is given to children younger than 18 years of age.

[Return to top](#)

## What about a sore throat that's caused by allergies?

If a sore throat is a symptom of hay fever or another allergy, your doctor can help you figure out how to avoid the things that trigger your allergies. You may also need to take medicine for your allergies.

[Return to top](#)

## How can I avoid catching or passing a sore throat?

The best ways to avoid catching or passing the viruses and bacteria that can lead to a sore throat are to wash your hands regularly, avoid touching your eyes or mouth and cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.

[Return to top](#)

## Easing the pain of a sore throat

- Take acetaminophen (one brand name: Tylenol) or ibuprofen (one brand name: Motrin) to relieve pain. Children should not take aspirin. Aspirin can cause a serious illness called Reye's syndrome when it is given to children younger than 18 years of age.
- Gargle with warm salt water (1 teaspoon of salt per 1 cup [8 ounces] of water).
- Suck on throat lozenges or hard candy.
- Suck on flavored frozen desserts (such as Popsicles).
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom or other rooms you spend lots of time in.
- Drink lots of liquids. They help keep your throat lubricated and prevent dehydration.

[Return to top](#)

## Source

[Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff.](#)

American Academy of Family Physicians

Reviewed/Updated: 01/11

Created: 01/96

[Copyright](#) © 1996-2011 [American Academy of Family Physicians](#)

[Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#)  
[About This Site](#) | [What's New](#) | [Advertising Policy](#)