Sore Throat (Pharyngitis)

Sore throats are one of the most common reasons students come to the clinic. The medical term for a sore throat is pharyngitis (fair-in-ji'-tis) A sore throat can be a sign of a cold, strep throat, mononucleosis, post-nasal drainage or dry air. It’s a symptom, not a disease. Sometimes, it’s the first sign that you are getting sick. It can be miserable.

Some students visit a healthcare provider at the first sign of a sore throat. That’s not usually necessary. Most sore throats go away within a week without any treatment. If the symptoms occur in the winter, dry air can be a cause and a humidifier can help. Gargling with warm salt water or swallowing a teaspoon of honey can make your throat feel better for awhile. Drinking water is important too. Have you been sitting next to someone who has been coughing or sneezing? Viruses and bacteria (germs) become air-borne through coughing and sneezing and infect others who are within 5 feet. The most recent recommendation for keeping the viruses from becoming airborne is to cough into your sleeve at the shoulder or elbow level. If you sneeze into your hands, the germs on your hands are transferred to any surface you touch. The next person who touches the same spot (or your hands/lips), or inhales the germs, can get sick too. The germs infect that person when they touch or scratch their nose, eyes or face. Germs are pesky and are easily spread. Frequent hand washing is very important to prevent illness or making others sick.

Most causes of a sore throat are viral-the common cold, sinusitis, the flu and mononucleosis. Mononucleosis can last for a several weeks. Antibiotics won’t help a viral infection. Strep throat is a bacterial infection and needs antibiotic treatment. Another, very rare bacterial cause of a sore throat is from a sexually transmitted disease through oral sex. Allergies and reflux of stomach contents can cause a sore throat too. See the back of this handout for more information about causes from dry air or irritants, mononucleosis, allergies, reflux, strep throat and tonsillitis.

Relief can be obtained with the over-the-counter medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), naproxen (Aleve), acetaminophen (Tylenol) or throat lozenges. Tylenol is good for pain and fever. Ibuprofen and naproxen relieve pain and fever AND decrease inflammation (swelling) which helps even more. Some lozenges contain Benzocaine which numbs your throat. Throat sprays help for a very short period time. Get as much rest as possible and drink lots of fluids. A decongestant decreases mucous production (runny nose), eases the sore throat and decreases cough. Common over-the-counter decongestants are pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine tablets (Sudafed or Actifed) and nose sprays like oxymetazoline (Afrin). Pseudoephedrine can keep you from falling into a deep sleep and make you irritable or jumpy. Don’t take pseudoephedrine late in the evening. You must ask for pseudoephedrine from the pharmacy. Phenylephrine doesn’t work quite as well but doesn’t interfere with sleep either. Most sore throats will go away within a week without treatment. Over-the-counter treatments or warm saline gargles and even a teaspoon of honey can make your sore throat feel better temporarily.

A sore throat doesn’t usually happen by itself. You may also notice a stuffy or runny nose, ear pain, headache, swollen neck glands, coughing, fatigue and/or having hot and cold flashes or feeling feverish. Several common accompanying conditions and symptoms are briefly described on the other side.
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**Viral Causes:**

**Cold**—may cause sneezing, watery eyes, cough, mild temperature, slight headaches or body aches. A cold may last a few days to a week. Coughing after a cold can last a couple of weeks. People who have or had asthma may also have tightness in their chest and/or wheezing. Inhalers can relieve asthma-like symptoms. Colds usually start with one symptom and get worse over a couple of days.

**Mononucleosis**—a sore throat from mononucleosis can be severe and last about 10 days. The fatigue that goes with mono can last for 4-12 weeks. Other symptoms of mono include: swollen and sore lymph nodes in your neck, armpit or groin; swollen tonsils (a lymph gland) white or grayish patches on your tonsils; headache; rash; loss of appetite; fever (starts low and can rise to 101°F); and a sore abdomen, (upper left and/or right side) from a swollen spleen or liver. A mono test may not be positive for a week or so after becoming sick. Rest, fluids, and anti-inflammatory medications are best to ease the symptoms of mono. Unfortunately it takes a month or two for infections to develop in others. Sharing food and drinks and having sex are common ways it’s spread. If students are on campus, so is mono.

**Sinusitis**—some cold-like viruses affect the sinuses, causing runny nose, sneezing, sore throat, headache and mild temperature elevation. Sometimes your ears pop or hurt due to head congestion. Viral causes of sinusitis generally affect both sides of the sinuses. Either the frontal sinuses (just above the eyebrows) or the maxillary sinuses (under the cheekbones by the nose) or both may be affected. Decongestants and anti-inflammatory medications can help.

**Bacterial Causes:**

**Strep throat**—the classic symptoms of strep throat are fever (up to 101°F), swollen neck glands, white patches on tonsils, and no cough. The back of your throat may look a beefy red color. Strep throat has a sudden onset. Antibiotics are prescribed. Strep is a cause of 5-10% of sore throats in adults.

**Tonsillitis**—an infection of the tonsils on each side of the back of your throat. Tonsils become swollen with or without white patches. Unless it’s caused by strep, antibiotics may not be prescribed. If tonsillitis happens multiple times in a year, removal may be recommended.

**Other causes**

**Allergies**—a runny nose is the most common allergy symptom along with nasal congestion. Sometimes the mucous goes down the back of your throat and the drainage causes a sore throat. Sinus congestion causes a headache that worsens with lying down and gets better after being up for an hour or so. Symptoms are often confused with sinusitis. Antihistamines and steroidal nasal sprays are best to decrease allergic symptoms.

**Reflux**—reflux happens when food or acid in your stomach goes up the esophagus. Acid in the stomach makes your throat sore. Many people say it feels like something is stuck in their throat. Eating smaller meals, avoiding spicy and greasy foods, chocolate, alcohol, and muscle relaxing drugs can help. Antacids (Tums, Maalox, Mylanta, etc) and medications that decrease the production of stomach acid (Pepcid, Zantac, Prilosec, etc.) can help. So does staying upright after a meal for at least an hour. Anxiety or stress and being overweight make it worse. A hiatal hernia is a common cause of reflux. A surgical treatment is available for severe cases.

**Exposure to dry air or smoke**—tobacco smoke is very irritating. It doesn’t matter if you smoke or if you inhale second-hand smoke. Avoidance is best. Dry air dries the throat-humidification is best.