

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) it's a symptom, not a disease. Sometimes, it's the first sign that you are getting sick. It can feel miserable.

Most sore throats go away within a week without any treatment.

Most sore throats are viral-the common cold, sinusitis, the flu and mononucleosis.

Antibiotics won't help a viral infection.

Strep throat is a bacterial infection and needs antibiotic treatment.

You can visit either clinic and ask for a free strep test. No appointment needed.

Allergies and reflux of stomach contents can cause a sore throat too.

See the second page for more information about various causes.

What to take?

ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), naproxen (Aleve), acetaminophen (Tylenol) or throat lozenges.

Lozenges that contain Benzocaine numbs your throat. Throat sprays help for a very short period time.

Flonase or Nasacort stop drainage that make your throat hurt. Not enough you say?

Afrin (oxymetazoline) is stronger but can only be used for 3-5 days. Try using it once daily.

Pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine tablets (Sudafed or Actifed) can help.

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.

Gargle with warm salt water or swallow a teaspoon of honey can make your throat feel better.

Drink extra water.

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 second page.

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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 7-10 days. 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 2-3 days.

Mononucleosis- a sore throat from mononucleosis can be severe and last 10-14 days. The fatigue that goes with mono may last for 4-12 weeks. Other mono symptoms include: swollen and sore lymph nodes in your neck, armpit or groin; swollen tonsils (a lymph gland) with white or grayish patches; 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 are not likely to 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 burns the tissues and 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.