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This information handout is provided for general medical knowledge only. It may or may not relate to your specific medical condition and it does not constitute individualized medical advice.

Sore Throats

Everybody gets a sore throat now and then. When you have a sore throat, this can affect speaking, swallowing, or breathing. Infections from viruses or bacteria are the main cause of sore throats, but allergies and sinus infections can also contribute. Some sore throats are worse than others. If you have a sore throat that lasts for more than five to ten days, you should see your doctor.

What Are the Symptoms of a Sore Throat?

Whenever a sore throat is severe, lasts longer than the usual five- to ten-day duration of a cold or flu, and is not associated with an avoidable allergy or irritation, you should seek medical attention. The following signs and symptoms should alert you to see your physician:

- Severe and prolonged sore throat
- Difficulty breathing
- Difficulty swallowing
- Difficulty opening the mouth
- Swelling of the face or neck
- Joint pain
- Earache
- Rash
- Fever (over 101°F)
- Blood in saliva or phlegm
- Frequently recurring sore throat
- Lump in neck
- Hoarseness lasting over two weeks

What Causes a Sore Throat?

Infections by contagious viruses or bacteria are the source of most sore throats. Other potential causes include:

Viruses—Sore throats often accompany viral infections, including the flu, colds, measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, croup, or mononucleosis (mono). Mono has the longest duration of symptoms, such as sore throat and extreme fatigue, and can last several weeks. Other symptoms include swollen glands in the neck, armpits, and groin; fever, chills, headache, or sometimes, serious breathing difficulties.

Bacterial infection—Strep throat is an infection caused by streptococcus bacteria. This infection can also cause scarlet fever, tonsillitis, pneumonia, sinusitis, and ear infections. Symptoms of strep throat often include fever (greater than 101°F), white draining patches on the throat, and swollen or tender lymph glands in the neck. Children may have a headache and stomach pain.

Epiglottitis—Epiglottitis is the most dangerous throat infection, because it causes swelling that closes the airway and requires prompt emergency medical attention. Suspect it when swallowing is extremely painful (causing drooling), when speech is muffled, and when breathing becomes difficult. Epiglottitis is often not seen just by looking in the mouth.

Allergies—You may also be allergic to pollens, molds, animal dander, and/or house dust, for examples, which can lead to a sore throat.

Irritation—Dry heat, dehydration, chronic stuffy nose, pollutants, car exhaust, chemical exposure, or straining your voice are examples of irritations that can lead to a sore throat.

Reflux—Reflux occurs when you regurgitate stomach contents up into the throat. You may notice this often in the morning when you first wake up. Reflux that goes into the throat is called laryngopharyngeal reflux (LPR).

Tumors—Tumors of the throat, tongue, and larynx (voice box) can cause a sore throat with pain going up to the ear. Other important symptoms can include hoarseness, difficulty swallowing, noisy breathing, a lump in the neck, unexplained weight loss, and/or spitting up blood in the saliva or phlegm.

What Are the Treatment Options?

A mild sore throat associated with cold or flu symptoms can be made more comfortable with the following remedies:

- Increase your liquid intake.
- Drink warm tea with honey (a favorite home remedy).
- Use a personal steamer or place a humidifier in your bedroom.
- Gargle with warm salt water several times daily: ¼ tsp salt to ½ cup water.

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- Take over-the-counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol Sore Throat[®], Tempra[®]) or ibuprofen (Motrin IB[®], Advil[®]).

For a more severe sore throat, your doctor may want to do a throat culture—swabbing the inside of your throat to see if there is a bacterial infection. If it is negative, your physician will base their treatment recommendation on the severity of your symptoms and the appearance of your throat on examination.

If you have a bacterial infection your doctor will likely recommend an antibiotic (such as penicillin or erythromycin) that kills or impairs bacteria. Antibiotics do not cure viral infections, but viruses do lower the patient's resistance to bacterial infections. When a combined infection like this happens, antibiotics may be recommended.

It is important to take an antibiotic as your physician directs and to finish all doses, even if your symptoms improve, otherwise the infection may not be gone and could return. Some patients will experience returning infections despite antibiotic treatment. If you experience this, it is important to discuss this situation with your physician.

What Questions Should I Ask My Doctor?

1. Is my sore throat the same as strep throat?
2. How long before this sore throat goes away?
3. How do I know if my sore throat is a serious problem?
4. Should I take antibiotics to treat my sore throat?