

Sore Throat

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO 10

Having a sore throat can feel very unpleasant. In most cases is harmless, but sometimes it can be more serious, and you may need to ask for advice from a health professional. This fact sheet helps you understand what to expect if you or your child develops a sore throat. You also learn when to ask for further advice and where to find it.

Useful facts

How common is a sore throat? Sore throats are common. Around half of us will have at least one sore throat a year. Most will usually get better without treatment within a week.

What causes a sore throat? Four in five sore throats are caused by viruses. This includes cold and flu type viruses, COVID19 and the Epstein-Barr virus causes glandular fever, a viral infection mostly affecting teenagers and young adults. Bacteria may also cause sore throat, such as in scarlet fever (see our separate [fact sheet](#)) or some sexually transmitted infections.

Sore throats can turn into tonsillitis. Tonsillitis is when the clumps of tissue on either side at the back of your throat (tonsils) become painful and swollen. Patches of creamy pus can appear on the tonsils. Painful lumps can develop in the neck from swollen glands. It may cause fever, and usually there is no cough.

Coronavirus (COVID19): COVID19 can cause a sore throat. If you think you might have it, look at the advice for your country in the last section: "where can I find out more?"

What can I expect to happen?

How long are my symptoms likely to last? Four out of five sore throats will get better within seven days. Hardly any last longer than two weeks.

Will I need antibiotics? Most sore throats are caused by viruses and don't need antibiotics. When antibiotics are not needed, they can do more harm than good.

What will happen if I do need to see a professional? They will ask you some questions and may examine your throat. This will help them decide how to treat you.

Will I need any tests? You are unlikely to need tests. A throat swab is sometimes taken to check if there are any harmful bugs in the throat. Rarely they may take a blood test to check for glandular fever.

What can I do myself to get better - now and in the future?

Home treatment Cool drinks, cool, soft food, and ice lollies can ease the pain. Adults can suck ice cubes or hard sweets and gargle with warm, salty water.

Talk to your pharmacy if you're not sure what's best for you or your child, or if you have other health conditions.

Smoking and vaping. Avoid smoking and other peoples' smoke. Vaping can cause throat soreness.

Fluids Adults should drink 6 to 8 glasses of fluid every day. Water is best, especially when you have a raised temperature (fever). Children should be offered fluids regularly.

Going to school. Unless your child has a raised temperature or feels unwell, it is OK for them to go to school with a sore throat.

If scarlet fever is common in your area, have a look at our [fact sheet](#) on it.

Treatment

Symptom relief Paracetamol and ibuprofen can help reduce symptoms from sore throats, temperatures and headaches.

Don't give paracetamol to a child under 2 months or ibuprofen to children under 3 months, or who have asthma unless prescribed by a doctor. Never give Aspirin to under-16s unless prescribed by a GP as it can cause brain and liver damage.

Lozenges gargles and sprays are available without prescription from your pharmacy or supermarket. Talk to your pharmacy team about what's best for you. Always read the safety information that comes with them.

Some lozenges are 'medicated' and contain active chemicals rather than just having a soothing effect. Some may contain a chemical to numb the pain. For people over the age of 12, lozenges containing flurbiprofen can quickly lessen the pain of a sore throat and can help with difficulty swallowing and a swollen throat.

When to seek help if you have a sore throat

Your pharmacist can help and can give you antibiotics if you need them. This is under the Pharmacy First Scheme. Speak to your pharmacy team or look at the NHS or Patient.co.uk websites below.

Seek professional advice if you or your child's symptoms are:

Severe,

No better after 2 weeks

Get worse.

Don't get better after over-the-counter medicines and you are worried.

Warning symptoms and signs:

Temperature over 37.8°C: Consider COVID19 and follow the advice on the link below.

Temperature of over 38°C for more than 3 days. That doesn't come down, even with ibuprofen or paracetamol. Contact your surgery or call 111.

Children under 5 with a temperature of 38 or more. See our fact sheet '[Fever in Children](#)'.

Severity. Pain is severe and is not helped by painkillers or is getting worse and you are having difficulty swallowing.

Voice changes. Your voice becomes muffled.

Difficulty getting enough fluids. You find it difficult to drink enough fluids and are dehydrated.

Effect on day-to-day life. Your symptoms stop you from going about your daily life normally.

Weak immunity. Ask for medical advice if you have weakened immunity. This might be because you have HIV/AIDS. Or if you take drugs such as high dose steroids, some anti-rheumatic drugs, a drug called carbimazole. People who are now undergoing or have recently completed chemotherapy should also seek help.

If you have any of these, contact your surgery or call:

England and Wales. Dial 111 This is the number for NHS 111.

Phone First service in Northern Ireland.

NHS24 in Scotland.

They will tell you what to do next. They can arrange a call from a health care professional if you need one.

Call 999 or go to A&E if you or your child has any of these:

Breathing problems.

The throat feels like it is closing up.

Breath sounds are high pitched.

Drooling and difficulty swallowing. Drooling or finding it hard to swallow even small quantities of water is an emergency!

Where to find out more

Your pharmacy team can help with advice on how to manage your symptoms. Or visit an NHS website for more information:

[NHS 111 Wales](#)

[NHS website](#)

[NHS Inform Scotland](#)

[NHS Direct NI](#)

For coronavirus information go to:

[NHS Website](#)

For information on [Scarlet Fever visit our website](#).

Pharmacy First in England

Under the Pharmacy First Scheme, your pharmacist can treat seven conditions that may require an antibiotic.

Sore throat

Sinusitis

Earache

Infected insect bites

Impetigo (a skin infection)

Shingles

Some urinary tract infections in women

For more information go to [the Patient.co.uk website here](#), or [NHS England website here](#).

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