

Solving Sore Throats

by Tim Ditman
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Temperatures may be warming, but [Awad Alyami, MD](#), an OSF HealthCare pediatrician, says we're still in the peak season for sore throats. Many cases have time-tested treatments, but some can have serious complications.

Dr. Alyami says a sore throat is an infection that causes inflammation in your throat. They're annoying and painful, bringing symptoms like difficulty swallowing or talking and swelling of glands and tonsils. Causes can include tonsil stones, heartburn and allergies. But most commonly, causes break down into two groups: viral and bacterial.

Viral infections

Dr. Alyami says many viruses can cause sore throats – the common cold, influenza, coronavirus and others. Dr. Alyami says if your sore throat comes with coughing or a runny nose, that's a sign it's a viral infection. You can start treatment at home with over-the-counter medicine like Tylenol and ibuprofen. You can also gargle salt water and, generally, stay hydrated. Water is good for all ages, and Pedialyte can help hydrate kids.

If your symptoms include fever and neck swelling, it's a more serious situation. You should see a health care provider.

Bacterial infections

The main bacterial infection that causes sore throats is group A streptococcus (commonly known as strep or strep throat). Strep throat may bring the hallmark sore throat symptoms, but you should also watch for fever and white patches toward the back of your mouth.

“This is a bacterial infection that's common in kids,” Dr. Alyami says of strep throat. “About 30% of sore throats are strep, and about 70% are viral. It's a big deal. We need to treat to prevent complications.”

The most common complication is dehydration, Dr. Alyami says.

“The sore throat is so bad, the child doesn't want to eat or drink,” he explains.

Other times, untreated strep throat can lead to abscesses, or pus pockets.

“If that abscess gets big enough, it can go toward other structures in the body that are very important. That infection can spread and progress very quickly,” Dr. Alyami says. Life-threatening conditions like difficulty breathing can result.

Dr. Alyami says providers can diagnose strep throat with a throat swab. They treat strep throat with 10 days of antibiotic medication, either injected or taken orally. He says most kids will take the medicine orally unless that's troublesome. For example, some kids have a tough time swallowing pills due to throat pain.

Prevention

It's advice you've heard before, but it's worth repeating. Dr. Alyami says good hand hygiene goes a long way to preventing sore throats. Wash your hands thoroughly, and keep them away from your face.

Early detection is also key.

“If the child is sick, especially with symptoms that could be strep, it’s better to get them to a health care professional early,” Dr. Alyami implores. “They can get checked and isolated for 12 to 24 hours before they start antibiotics.

“If you’re sure about what they have, it’s better to just bring them in and get them checked,” he adds.