

Infection Prevention and You



Is strep causing that sore throat?

“My throat hurts!” That’s not a phrase any parent wants to hear, and their first guess is often strep throat. Here’s what you need to know about strep throat and how to prevent it.

What is strep throat?

Strep throat (or Group A Streptococcal pharyngitis) is a common illness in children, but can affect people at any age. It is caused by the Group A *Streptococcus pyogenes* bacteria and usually starts with a sudden onset of sore throat, pain when swallowing, swollen lymph nodes in the neck, and fever. Also, small red or white spots can appear at the back of the throat or on the tonsils. Most cases happen in the winter and spring, but strep throat can occur at any time of year.

How does it spread?

The bacteria that cause strep throat are very contagious. Strep throat spreads through mucus droplets when a sick person coughs or sneezes, shares food and drink, or touches other surfaces (like doorknobs and toys) with unwashed hands. The germ can infect you when it comes in contact with your eyes, nose, or mouth.

How do healthcare providers test for strep? How is it treated?

Strep bacteria only cause a small portion of sore throats. Strep throat can be diagnosed by culturing the throat. A throat culture involves swabbing the throat and putting the swab in a special cup (culture) that allows bacteria to grow. Many doctors have the ability to perform a rapid test in the office to determine if the sore throat is caused by the strep bacteria (and needs treatment with antibiotics) or if it is a viral infection (which cannot—and should not—be treated with antibiotics). Many doctors also recommend an over-the-counter fever and pain reducer, such as acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) or ibuprofen (e.g., Advil and Motrin). Generally, most people begin to feel better within the first few days of treatment.

If left untreated, strep throat can spread to other places in the body and cause more serious illness, such as scarlet fever, rheumatic fever, or heart or kidney damage. But with prompt and appropriate treatment, there is very little risk of developing these more serious complications.

You can return to school or work after 24 hours of starting antibiotic treatment for strep throat. Until then, stay home to prevent spreading the infection to others. Be sure to take all of your medication *exactly* as prescribed (**even** if you are feeling better). Stopping antibiotics early can increase the risk of developing resistant bacteria, making your next infection much harder to treat.

How can you prevent strep throat?

The best thing you can do to avoid strep throat is to wash your hands and teach your children good hand washing practices. If you are sick, cover your cough by coughing and sneezing into your sleeve. Clean your hands after sneezing, coughing, touching your eyes, nose, or mouth, after using the restroom, and before and after eating or drinking. Avoid sharing eating utensils and drinks, and start making a habit of keeping your hands away from your face.

Additional resources

CDC—About Group A Strep <http://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/about/index.html>

CDC—GAS Frequently Asked Questions <http://www.cdc.gov/groupAstrep/about/faqs.html>

APIC—ABCs of Antibiotics <http://professionals.site.apic.org/files/2013/10/AntibioticInfographic14-FINAL.pdf>

APIC—Ask questions about your medications <http://consumers.site.apic.org/infection-prevention-basics/ask-questions>

