

Strep Throat

A sore throat can be a relatively common occurrence, especially during the cold and flu season. In fact, sore throats are usually a symptom of infection with a virus, such as a **rhinovirus** (a type of virus that causes inflammation of the mucous membranes that line the nose and throat).

Sometimes a sore throat can be caused by bacteria. Strep throat, for example, is caused by an infection with a type of *Streptococcus* bacteria. Strep throat is more common in children than in adults.

Since it is difficult to identify the

cause of a sore throat from symptoms alone, a doctor can take a throat culture to determine if your sore throat is caused by this particular type of bacteria and, if necessary, treat your sore throat using antibiotics.

If your sore throat is not caused by the bacteria that causes strep throat, you may have a viral infection. Antibiotics are not effective against a viral infection.

An article in the December 13, 2000, issue of *JAMA* discusses diagnosing sore throats caused by *Streptococcus* bacteria.

WHAT ARE STREPTOCOCCAL BACTERIA?

There are many different types of bacteria. The bacteria are classified by various characteristics, including their shape. Streptococcal bacteria can cause other

medical conditions, such as scarlet fever and **impetigo** (a skin infection that is more common among young children 2 to 6 years old than other groups).

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS OF STREP THROAT:

(Every person is different and may experience some symptoms and not others, or in various combinations.)

- Sore throat that is red (from inflammation)
- White patches on the tonsils or back of throat
- Swollen lymph nodes in the neck
- Fever
- Headache

Children may also experience stomach pain, nausea, or vomiting. (If you have a strep throat, you usually do not have a stuffy nose or cough.)

WHY DO I HAVE TO TAKE ALL THE ANTIBIOTIC PRESCRIBED?

Even though some of your symptoms may be getting better, most likely all the disease-causing bacteria have not been killed. If you do not take all of the antibiotics prescribed, the bacteria have the opportunity to reproduce bacteria that are resistant to the antibiotic. The bacteria begin to multiply as the antibiotic leaves

your system. The most important reason for taking all of the antibiotics prescribed for strep throat is not only to treat the symptoms but to avoid serious complications such as **rheumatic fever** (a disease characterized by pain and swelling of tissues in various parts of the body) and kidney problems.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES OF A SORE THROAT:

- Viruses, such as those that cause the common "cold," influenza, and **mononucleosis** (an infection caused by a virus characterized by a high temperature, sore throat, and swollen lymph nodes)
- Allergies, such as "hay fever"
- Laryngitis (inflammation of the **larynx** or "voice box")
- Measles
- Mumps
- Bacterial infections
- Smoking or being exposed to smoke or other polluted air

Pain in and around the throat can be a symptom of a number of medical problems. Your doctor can make an evaluation and perform tests, when necessary, to determine the cause of your sore throat.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Infectious Diseases
www.cdc.gov/ncidod
- American Academy of Family Physicians
Sore Throat
800/274-2237 or
familydoctor.org/healthfacts/163
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
www.niaid.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, *The AMA Complete Guide to Your Children's Health*, *The AMA Home Medical Library*, *The AMA Family Medical Guide*, *The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine*

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