Is It Strep Throat?

Strep throat is a common type of sore throat in children, but it's not very common in adults. Healthcare professionals can do a quick test to determine if a sore throat is strep throat and decide if antibiotics are needed. Proper treatment can help you feel better faster and prevent spreading it to others!

Many things can cause that unpleasant, scratchy, and sometimes painful condition known as a sore throat. Viruses, bacteria, allergens, environmental irritants (such as cigarette smoke), chronic postnasal drip, and fungi can all cause a sore throat. While many sore throats will get better without treatment, some throat infections—including strep throat—may need antibiotic treatment.

How You Get Strep Throat

Strep throat is an infection in the throat and tonsils caused by group A *Streptococcus* bacteria (called "group A strep"). Group A strep bacteria can also live in a person's nose and throat without causing illness. The bacteria are spread through contact with droplets after an infected person coughs or sneezes. If you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes after touching something that has these droplets on it, you may become ill. If you drink from the same glass or eat from the same plate as the infected person, you could also become ill. It is also possible to get strep throat from contact with sores from group A strep skin infections.

Common Symptoms of Strep Throat

The most common symptoms of strep throat include:

- Sore throat, usually starts quickly and can cause severe pain when swallowing
- A fever (101°F or above)
- Red and swollen tonsils, sometimes with white patches or streaks of pus
- Tiny, red spots (petechiae) on the roof of the mouth (the soft or hard palate)
- Headache, nausea, or vomiting

A fever is a common symptom of strep throat.

- Swollen lymph nodes in the front of the neck
- Sandpaper-like rash

A Simple Test Gives Fast Results

Healthcare professionals can test for strep by swabbing the throat to quickly see if group A strep bacteria are causing a sore throat. **A strep test is needed to tell if you have strep throat; just looking at your throat is not enough to make a diagnosis.** If the test is positive, your healthcare professional can prescribe antibiotics. If the strep test is negative, but your clinician still strongly suspects you have this infection, then they can take a throat culture swab to test for the bacteria, but those results will take a little longer to come back.

Antibiotics reduce the length of time you're sick and reduce your symptoms.

Antibiotics Get You Well Fast

The strep test results will help your healthcare professional decide if you need antibiotics, which can:

- Decrease the length of time you're sick
- Reduce your symptoms
- Help prevent the spread of infection to friends and family members
- Prevent more serious complications, such as tonsil and sinus infections, and acute rheumatic fever (a rare inflammatory disease that can affect the heart, joints, skin, and brain)

You should start feeling better in just a day or two after starting antibiotics. Call your healthcare professional if you don't feel better after taking antibiotics for 48 hours. People with strep throat should stay home from work, school, or daycare until they have taken antibiotics for at least 24 hours so they don't spread the infection to others.

Be sure to finish the entire prescription, even when you start feeling better, unless your healthcare professional tells you to stop taking the medicine. When you stop taking antibiotics early, you risk getting an infection later that is resistant to antibiotic treatment.

More Prevention Tips: Wash Those Hands

The best way to keep from getting strep throat is to wash your hands often and avoid sharing eating utensils, like forks or cups. It is especially important for anyone with a sore throat to wash their hands often and cover their mouth when coughing and sneezing. There is no vaccine to prevent strep throat.

More Information

- CDC's Group A Streptococcal Disease Information (http://www.cdc.gov/groupAstrep/)
- Sore Throat Information from CDC's Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work Program (http://www.cdc.gov/getsmart/community/for-patients/common-illnesses/sore-throat.html)
- CDC's Handwashing Information: Clean Hands Save Lives (http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/)
- CDC's Hygiene Etiquette Information: Coughing and Sneezing (http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/etiquette/coughing_sneezing.html)