# Sore throat and tonsillitis

When to see a doctor, what helps, and when to get help fast

## What is it?

A sore throat (pharyngitis) is very common and is usually caused by a virus. When the tonsils, the two soft lumps at the back of the throat, are mainly affected it is called tonsillitis. Most sore throats last about a week and get better on their own, without antibiotics.

## You might notice

- A raw, scratchy or painful throat, often worse when you swallow
- A high temperature, or feeling hot, shivery and achy
- A cough, runny nose or hoarse voice if a cold virus is the cause
- Red, swollen tonsils, sometimes with white or yellow spots
- Tender, swollen glands at the sides of your neck
- In children: headache, tummy ache, feeling sick or being sick

## What can cause it

### Viruses

Colds, flu, COVID-19 and similar bugs cause most sore throats

### Strep bacteria

Group A strep causes some cases, more often in children aged 5 to 15

### Glandular fever

A virus that can cause a very sore throat, swollen glands and tiredness

### Irritation

Smoking, dry air, overusing your voice, acid reflux or hay fever

### Less common causes

Infections caught through oral sex, or medicines that lower immunity

### Virus or bacteria?

Both usually clear in about a week, and most do not need antibiotics

## Who is more at risk

**Children and teenagers** **Schools, nurseries and shared housing**

**Close contact with someone ill** **Smoking** **Weak immune system**

**Winter and early spring**

Please turn over for how to ease it, what the doctor will do and when to get help

# How you can help yourself

**Take pain relief.** Paracetamol or ibuprofen ease pain and fever; follow the pack.

**Drink plenty.** Sip cool or warm drinks, not hot ones, so you do not get dehydrated.

**Soothe your throat.** Pharmacy lozenges or sprays may help for a short while.

**Choose soft, cool foods.** Ice lollies, yoghurt or soup are easier to swallow.

**Rest at home.** Children can go back to school once the fever has gone.

**Stop it spreading.** Wash hands, use tissues and do not share cups or cutlery.

# What the doctor will do

1. Check your breathing, swallowing and how much you are drinking
2. Look at your throat and neck and check your temperature
3. Use a simple score to judge how likely strep bacteria are
4. Offer antibiotics only if they will help, sometimes as a back-up

Antibiotics shorten a sore throat by less than a day on average and can cause side effects. Tell the doctor if you take medicines that can lower immunity, such as carbimazole, methotrexate or chemotherapy.

## Call 999 if you or your child

- Is struggling to breathe or has noisy, high-pitched breathing
- Is drooling or cannot swallow their own saliva
- Has a muffled voice and sits leaning forward to breathe
- Is very drowsy, confused, or cold and blotchy

## Contact us the same day if

- You cannot swallow fluids, or are passing little urine
- One side of the throat or neck swells, or you cannot open your mouth
- Pain is no better after 3 days and fever is over 38°C
- You have a weak immune system or take the medicines above

## Book a routine appointment if

It is not starting to improve after a week, keeps coming back, or you have a sore throat, hoarse voice or neck lump for more than 3 weeks.

## Repeated tonsillitis

Removing the tonsils may be considered after 7 bad bouts in a year, 5 a year for 2 years, or 3 a year for 3 years. Recovery takes about 2 weeks.

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**Out of hours**
NHS 24: call 111
More advice: nhsinform.scot

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