



## Wellness Weekly

# Strep Throat in Children

Strep throat is an infection caused by a type of bacteria (group A *streptococcus*). It is a relatively common infection, especially in children of school age — between ages 5 and 15. It's very unusual in children under 2 years of age, unless an older sibling has strep infection.

Rarely, group A strep can become invasive and spread to other parts of the body, like the blood or the brain, and cause serious, life-threatening illness.

### Signs and symptoms of strep throat

It is uncommon to have a cough, sneezing or runny nose with strep throat. Those are signs of a viral infection, such as a cold. Strep throat causes 20% of throat and tonsil infections in school age children; viral infections cause the rest. Signs and symptoms of strep throat can include:

- Rapid onset of severe sore throat
- Painful swallowing
- Fever
- Swollen, enlarged lymph nodes in your neck
- There may be tiny red spots back of the throat, the roof of your mouth or possibly white spots on your tonsils
- Scarlet fever: a bright red sandpaper-like rash over most of the body

But keep in mind that not all these symptoms may be present with every person who has strep throat.

### What is Scarlet Fever?

Scarlet fever is a bacterial illness that develops in some people who have strep throat. Also known as scarlatina, scarlet fever features a bright red rash that covers most of the body. Scarlet fever almost always includes a sore throat and a high fever. Scarlet fever is most common in children 5 to 15 years of age. Although it was once considered a serious childhood illness, antibiotic treatments have made it less threatening. Still, if left untreated, scarlet fever can result in more-serious conditions that affect the heart, kidneys and other parts of the body.

### Is Strep Throat Contagious?

Strep throat is very contagious. Anybody can get it, but most cases are in school-age kids and teens. Infections are common during the school year, with peaks in winter and early spring, when big groups of kids and teens are in close contact.

### How Do People Get Strep Throat?

The bacteria that cause strep throat tend to hang out in the nose and throat. So normal activities like sneezing, coughing, or shaking hands can easily spread an infection from one person to another. The Strep A pyogenes bacterium can live on surfaces for hours to days. Those with untreated strep throat are more likely to spread the infection when their symptoms are most severe but can still infect others for up to 3 weeks. That's why it's so important to teach kids to wash their hands well and often. This can lower their chances of getting contagious diseases like strep throat.

### How is strep throat diagnosed?

The only way to be sure of a strep throat diagnosis is to get tested. A rapid test can be performed in the doctor's office or urgent care facility. If it's positive, your child has strep throat. If it's negative, the doctor will send a sample to a lab for a throat culture. The results are usually available within a few days.

### How Is Strep Throat Treated?

Doctors usually prescribe 10 days of antibiotics to treat strep throat. Unlike colds or flu, which are viral infections and cannot be helped with antibiotics, strep throat is caused by bacteria.

This infection is treated for several reasons.

1. Symptoms go away much faster with treatment.
2. Antibiotic treatment decreases the chances of spreading it to someone else.
3. Treatment prevents future complications.

Left untreated, the bacteria that cause strep throat can spread to other parts of your body. Although in this country complications are rare, they can be very serious or even fatal. Complications can include:

- **Ear or sinus infections:** Infections can occur when bacteria cause swelling and inflammation in your ears or sinuses.

- **Tonsillar Abscesses:** Pockets of pus (abscesses) can form around your tonsils.
- **Guttate psoriasis:** A skin condition that causes small, red and scaly teardrop-shaped spots to develop on your arms, legs and torso.
- **Rheumatic heart disease:** The disease results from damage to heart valves caused by one or several episodes of rheumatic fever, an autoimmune inflammatory reaction to streptococcal pharyngitis or strep throat. It most commonly occurs in childhood and can lead to death or life-long disability.
- **Post-streptococcal glomerulonephritis:** A kidney disease that can develop after strep infections.
- **Invasive streptococcal infection:** An infection that can occur when bacteria enter your tissue. It can be life-threatening, with conditions occurring such as streptococcal toxic shock syndrome, necrotizing fasciitis and other severe infections. This can ultimately lead to rapid decline and death.

Within about 24 hours after starting on antibiotics, your child probably won't have a fever and won't be contagious. By the second or third day, other symptoms should start to go away. Even when kids feel better, they should take the antibiotics as prescribed. This is the best way to kill the harmful bacteria. Otherwise, bacteria can stay in the throat and symptoms can come back.

#### **To prevent spreading strep throat to others in your home:**

- Keep your child's eating utensils, dishes, and drinking glasses separate and wash them in the dishwasher or in hot, soapy water after each use.
- Make sure your child doesn't share food, drinks, napkins, handkerchiefs, or towels with other family members.
- Teach your child to cover all sneezes or coughs. If a tissue isn't handy, kids should sneeze or cough into their elbow, not their hands.
- Remind everyone to wash their hands well and often.
- Give your child a new toothbrush after the antibiotic treatment starts and they're no longer contagious.

#### **Amoxicillin shortage**

If your child has been prescribed amoxicillin and it is not available at the pharmacy, it's important to talk to your pharmacist as well as the health care professional who prescribed the medication because there are other alternatives that can be used. A different antibiotic can be prescribed, or they can advise you on how to use a different formulation of amoxicillin that is available — for example, crushing a tablet or opening a capsule if your child is not able to swallow medications.

#### **How can I help my child feel better while recovering from strep?**

There are many sore throat home remedies that can help relieve your symptoms.

- Eat soft foods, such as applesauce, mashed potatoes, yogurt, ice cream.
- Drink soothing liquids, such as warm tea, warm broth, hot chocolate.
- Gargle with warm salt water (1/4 tsp. salt dissolved in 8 oz. warm water)
- Suck on age-appropriate throat lozenges or ice pops.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water.
- Use a cool-mist vaporizer or humidifier.
- Take a pain reliever, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®).

Don't give your child aspirin. Aspirin can cause a life-threatening illness called Reye's syndrome in children and adolescents who have fevers.

#### **When should I see my healthcare provider?**

If you're not getting better, let your healthcare provider know right away. You shouldn't stop taking your antibiotic unless directed by your provider. Call your provider if you aren't improving one to two days after starting the antibiotic. You should also call if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Fever one or two days after feeling better.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Earache.
- Skin rash.
- Painful joints.
- New onset of muscle pain.
- Shortness of breath.
- Dark urine, rash or chest pain (may occur three to four weeks later).

#### **Be aware of myths about strep infections**

##### **Myth: You can tell if a child has strep simply by looking at their throat.**

This is a fairly common myth. Viral throat infections can look very similar to strep. If your child has a sore throat with fever and a red, swollen throat or tonsils with white pus on them, then they need to be seen by their healthcare provider to be tested for strep throat. If

the tests for strep come back negative, then your child's throat infection is likely caused by a virus and antibiotics will not be needed. Viral infections of the throat usually improve in two to three days without treatment. Most studies have shown that doctors are only correct about half the time when they think a child has strep after just a physical exam.

**Myth: if my tonsils have been removed I can no longer get strep throat**

Strep throat usually affects your throat and tonsils. But you can still get the infection if you don't have tonsils — it doesn't make you immune. However, if you've had your tonsils removed, your risk of getting strep throat decreases. You may get the infection less often. In addition, your symptoms may not be as severe.

**Myth: if my child doesn't have a fever it can't be strep throat**

Strep throat infections are often accompanied by fever, but not everyone with a strep infection will have a fever. Sore throat with fever are the most common manifestations of strep throat, but strep can also present as sore throat and a stomach ache or nausea (stomach symptoms are more common in children with strep infections than in adults), or sore throat and a headache. Occasionally strep throat can also reveal itself as a fever and stomach ache without a sore throat.

**Myth: strep will go away on its own without treatment**

Strep throat typically goes away in three to seven days with or without antibiotic treatment. However, if you don't take antibiotics, you can remain contagious for two to three weeks and are at higher risk for complications, such as rheumatic fever.

**Myth: I can give my child antibiotics left over from . . .**

Never take medicines left over from an earlier illness or give leftover medicine to anyone else. Leftover antibiotics can make strep throat more difficult to diagnose and treat and can cause serious side effects. Please let your child's healthcare provider diagnose and prescribe appropriate treatment for your child's illness.

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