

Sore Throat

Sore throat, known as **pharyngitis** or **tonsillitis** (inflammation of the **pharynx** or **tonsils**, respectively), is one of the most common health complaints. The April 7, 2004, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about diagnosing and treating sore throats.

CAUSES OF SORE THROAT

Most sore throats are caused by infections with **viruses**, small organisms that do not respond to antibiotics. Examples include the sore throat of a common cold, **influenza** (flu), or **infectious mononucleosis** (a viral disease with sore throat, fever, and lymph node enlargement).

Other causes include

- Bacterial infections, including **strep throat**, caused by *Streptococcus* bacteria
- Low humidity
- Coughing or yelling excessively
- Smoking or air pollution
- Allergies

DIAGNOSING THE CAUSE OF SORE THROAT

- Physical examination of the throat
- A swab of the back of the throat may be taken for laboratory testing to determine if the sore throat is caused by a bacterial infection: a rapid test for strep or a **throat culture**, which is more accurate but takes several days for a result.

TREATING SORE THROAT

- If the cause of your sore throat is a virus, your doctor will likely recommend that you drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, and take an over-the-counter pain reliever if needed. Antibiotics will not help and will not shorten the duration of a sore throat caused by a virus.
- Cough drops and gargling with warm water can help soothe a sore throat.
- Antibiotics are prescribed if laboratory tests confirm that the sore throat is caused by bacteria, such as *Streptococcus*.
- Using antibiotics when they are not needed can cause adverse effects in the person taking them and antibiotic resistance. Antibiotic resistance has become more common in recent years as a result of the overuse of antibiotics. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria must be treated with different, more powerful antibiotics and are much more difficult to treat.
- If antibiotics are prescribed, it is important to take the entire course of medication exactly as prescribed. Stopping before your medication is finished because symptoms have cleared up can encourage antibiotic resistance—always take the full course.

COMPLICATIONS OF SORE THROAT

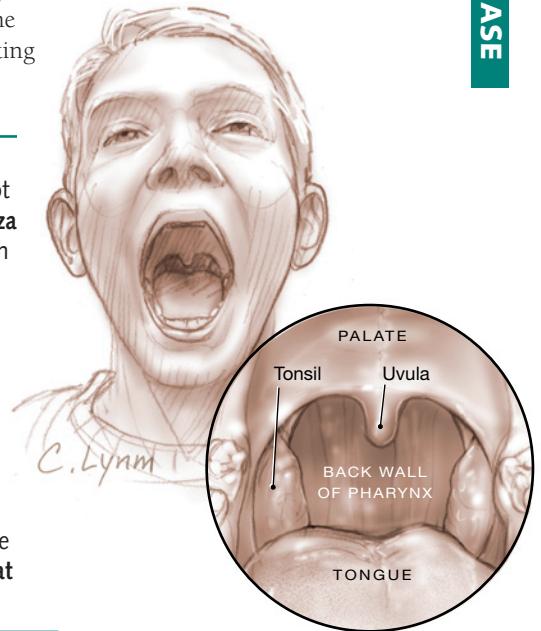
- Sore throats caused by viruses get better by themselves, usually within a week, without complications.
- If strep throat goes untreated for too long, it may lead to an abscess in the throat, **rheumatic fever**, which can cause heart damage, or **glomerulonephritis**, which causes kidney damage. These complications are now uncommon in developed countries.

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To find this and other JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on coughs, colds, and antibiotics was published in the May 28, 2003, issue; and one on strep throat was published in the December 13, 2000, issue.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

