



Free Australian health advice you can count on.

Medical problem? Call 1800 022 222. If you need urgent medical help, call triple zero immediately

healthdirect Australia is a free service where you can talk to a nurse or doctor who can help you know what to do.

Strep throat

4-minute read



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What is strep throat?

Strep throat is an infection of the throat. Most sore throats are caused by viruses, but some are caused by bacteria called *Streptococcus pyogenes*. This bacterial infection can be treated with [antibiotics](#).

Strep throat infections are very contagious. They are usually passed directly from person to person from talking, coughing or sneezing.

Strep throat is common in school-age children. Children under 2 years old and adults not exposed to children are much less likely to get strep throat.

What are the symptoms of strep throat?

The symptoms of a strep throat infection may include:

- [sore, red throat](#) and tonsils
- painful swallowing
- [fever](#)
- chills
- [headaches](#)
- [muscle aches and pains](#)
- feeling tired
- swollen, tender [lymph nodes](#) ("glands") in the neck
- loss of appetite



CHECK YOUR SYMPTOMS — Use the colds and flu [Symptom Checker](#) and find out if you need to seek medical help.

How is strep throat diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and examine your throat. They may rub a cotton swab against a tonsil in the back of your throat to get a sample of bacteria.

The sample will be tested in a lab to see if the cause of the sore throat is bacteria or a viral infection.



How is strep throat treated?

If your doctor suspects you have strep throat, they may prescribe an [antibiotic](#) before you have all the results from the lab tests. It is very important to take all of the prescribed medicine, even after the symptoms have gone away, to prevent the infection from coming back.

The symptoms of strep throat may go away as soon as 24 hours after you start treatment. The symptoms rarely last longer than 5 days.

You can be contagious for 2 to 3 weeks if you're not treated. But if you take antibiotics, you will stop being contagious after about 24 hours.

Strep throat self-care

It's important you follow the full treatment prescribed by your doctor.

If you have a strep throat, there are a number of different ways that might help ease your symptoms:

- Make sure you have enough fluids. Drink clear soup, cold drinks, and other clear, nutritious liquids. If eating hurts your throat, don't force yourself to eat solid food. When you are able to eat more foods, choose [healthy food](#) to give you strength and to help fight the infection.
- Do not [smoke](#). Do not breathe second-hand smoke.
- Gargle with salt water.
- Suck on lozenges or hard candy.
- Don't talk a lot. Rest your voice.
- Put warm compresses on your neck.

Make sure you don't pass strep throat to anyone else by washing your hands and by covering your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze.

If you have a fever, rest and limit your activities until the fever is gone. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you can take [paracetamol](#), or [ibuprofen](#) to reduce your fever and to [relieve pain](#).

Can strep throat be prevented?

The following suggestions may help you prevent the spread of your strep infection to others:

- Avoid close contact with other people until you have been taking the antibiotic for at least 24 hours and you feel well.
- Use tissues when you [cough](#) and dispose of them carefully.
- [Hand washing](#) is the best method of prevention. Wash your hands before you touch food, dishes, glasses, silverware, napkins, etc.
- Wash your hands after you cough and before you touch certain things, like food, dishes, glasses, silverware or napkins.
- Use paper cups, or separate cups, and paper towels in bathrooms instead of shared drinking cups and hand towels.
- Do not share food and eating utensils with others.
- Do not prepare food for others if you have strep throat.

People with strep throat should not go to childcare, preschool, school or work until they are no longer contagious.

Complications of strep throat

If it's not treated, strep throat can lead to complications including:

- [scarlet fever](#)
- [rheumatic fever](#), which can lead to [rheumatic heart disease](#)
- an abscess next to a tonsil
- kidney problems

Sources:

[RHD Australia](#) (*Sore throat can lead to a broken heart - Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD)*), [Lab Tests Online-AU](#) (*Strep throat testing*), [SA Health](#) (*Streptococcal sore throat - including symptoms, treatment and prevention*), [Australian Journal of General Practice](#) (*Management of sore throat in primary care*)

Learn more here about the [development and quality assurance of healthdirect content](#).

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