

Tonsillitis

Tonsillitis is a common childhood illness but teenagers and adults can get it too.

Most children and adults get viral tonsillitis. This type has to run its course and antibiotics won't help. It usually goes away on its own after a few days.

Symptoms of tonsillitis

Tonsillitis can feel like a bad cold or flu. The tonsils at the back of your throat will be red and swollen.

The main symptoms are:

- a sore throat
- difficulty swallowing
- hoarse or no voice
- a high temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or above
- coughing
- headache
- feeling sick
- earache
- feeling tired

Sometimes the symptoms can be more severe and include:

- swollen painful glands in your neck – feels like a lump on the side of your neck
- white pus-filled spots on your tonsils at the back of your throat
- bad breath

Symptoms will usually go away after 3 to 4 days.

You may need to stay off work or keep your child at home until you or your child feel better.

You should:

- use tissues when you cough or sneeze and throw them away after
- wash your hands after coughing or sneezing

Treatment for tonsillitis

Tonsillitis usually has to run its course.

To help ease the symptoms:

- get plenty of rest
- drink cool drinks to soothe the throat
- take paracetamol or ibuprofen which are available without prescription
- gargle with warm salty water - children should not try this

How to gargle with salty water

1. Dissolve half a teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm water – warm water helps salt dissolve.
2. Gargle with the solution then spit it out – don't swallow it.
3. Repeat as often as you like.

This is not suitable for younger children.

⚠ Important

Do not give aspirin to children under 16.

A pharmacist can help with tonsillitis

Speak to a pharmacist about tonsillitis. They can give advice and suggest treatments to ease a sore throat. Treatments can include lozenges, throat sprays and antiseptic solutions.

See a GP if:

- you have white pus-filled spots on the tonsils at the back of your throat
- the sore throat is so painful it's difficult to eat or drink
- the symptoms don't go away after 4 days

What happens at your appointment

Your doctor can usually tell its tonsillitis by asking about your symptoms and looking at the back of your throat.

Sometimes they might wipe a cotton bud at the back of your throat to test for bacteria. Your GP might organise a blood test to rule out glandular fever.

You'll get any test results back within a week.

Treatment from a GP

Treatment will depend on what caused your tonsillitis. Most children and adults get viral tonsillitis. This type has to run its course and antibiotics won't help. Your GP may prescribe antibiotics for bacterial tonsillitis.

Usually, your GP will have to wait for the test results to tell which type you have.

It's very rare that someone needs to have their tonsils taken out (tonsillectomy). This is usually only the case if you have severe tonsillitis that keeps coming back.

Complications with tonsillitis

Complications with tonsillitis are very rare. If they happen they mostly affect young children aged 2 to 4.

Sometimes you can get a pocket filled with pus (abscess) between your tonsils and the wall of your throat. This is called quinsy (peritonsillar abscess).

Antibiotics are the most common form of treatment for a peritonsillar abscess. Drainage of the pus may also be carried out by a specialist.

See a GP urgently or go to the emergency department (ED) if:

- you have a severe sore throat that quickly gets worse

You should also go to your ED if you have difficulty breathing, swallowing or speaking.

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