

Sore throat

Sore throats are common and usually not serious. Most people will have at least 2 or 3 every year. Children and teenagers are more likely to get sore throats than adults.

Most sore throats will clear after a few days. 9 in 10 people with a sore throat get better in less than a week.

Sore throat symptoms

Sore throats are usually a symptom of a viral infection.

Symptoms of a sore throat include:

- painful throat, especially when swallowing
- dry scratchy throat
- redness in the back of the mouth
- bad breath
- mild cough
- swollen neck glands

You may also have a runny or blocked nose, sneezing, fever and a tickly cough. Sometimes your voice may get hoarse.

A sore throat can be a symptom of COVID-19.

[Advice about symptoms of COVID-19 and what to do](#)

Causes of sore throat

Most sore throats are caused by a virus.

Viruses cause:

- [tonsillitis](#)
- [glandular fever](#)

- laryngitis

Sometimes bacteria cause sore throats. The bacterial infection [Strep A](#) causes strep throat and [scarlet fever](#). These can give you a sore throat.

Your immune system may clear the strep throat. Your GP may prescribe an antibiotic for severe strep throat that is not responding to other treatment.

Treating a sore throat at home

Most sore throats will clear after a few days. Usually, you do not need to contact a GP if you have a sore throat.

Painkillers you can buy without a prescription can usually relieve the symptoms of a sore throat.

Most sore throats are caused by a virus so antibiotics do not help. Almost all sore throats will get better without antibiotics.

Babies and children

To help soothe a sore throat and keep your child hydrated:

- encourage them to drink water, juice or milk
- breastfeed or bottle-feed your baby
- give them an ice lolly to suck on

Ask a pharmacist about pain relief for children.

Adults

To help soothe a sore throat:

- avoid hot food and hot drinks
- eat cool, soft food
- drink plenty of cool or warm liquids
- avoid smoking - [get help to quit smoking](#)
- gargle with warm, salty water - do not give children salt water to gargle

► [How to gargle with salt water](#)

Medicines for sore throat

Ask a pharmacist about medicines to help relieve the pain and discomfort of a sore throat.

It can help to use:

- [paracetamol](#) or ibuprofen

- medicated lozenges or anaesthetic sprays
- medicated sprays

You can buy these without a prescription.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics do not work for viral infections such as [colds](#) and [flu](#).

GPs do not usually prescribe antibiotics for sore throats.

This is because most sore throats are caused by a virus and antibiotics will not:

- relieve pain or help your symptoms
- help you recover faster

Your GP will only prescribe antibiotics if they think you have a bacterial infection (strep throat) and:

- you have a severe case of strep throat
- other treatments have not worked

Contact your GP if:

- you have a sore throat and a very high temperature, or you feel hot and shivery
- your child or baby is not drinking enough or has dry nappies
- you have a sore throat and weak immune system
- you still have a sore throat after 2 weeks
- you're worried about your sore throat

A severe or long-lasting sore throat could be strep throat or [tonsillitis](#).

Call 112 or 999, or go to your nearest emergency department (ED) if:

- you have difficulty breathing
- you're drooling or cannot swallow your saliva
- your symptoms are severe and getting worse quickly
- your baby is very sleepy, lethargic, not responding to you or difficult to wake

 [Find your nearest ED](#)

Going back to work or school

Do not go to work or send your child to school or creche with an infection.

You can go back to work, school or creche when your symptoms have been gone for 48 hours.

Preventing sore throat

Some causes of sore throat can be prevented with vaccines.

Make sure [your child's vaccines or immunisations](#) are up to date, including the [children's flu vaccine](#) each year.

Check if you can get a [free flu vaccine](#) and a [booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine](#).

Follow advice on how to prevent catching or spreading an infection:

Do

- ✓ wash your hands often with warm water and soap
- ✓ cough into your elbow to stop germs getting on to your hands and spreading to other people
- ✓ use tissues to trap germs when you cough or sneeze
- ✓ bin used tissues as quickly as possible
- ✓ stay fit and healthy

Don't

- ✗ do not share towels or household items, such as cups, with someone who has a viral infection
- ✗ do not touch your eyes or nose - you can infect yourself if you've come into contact with a virus

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