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# Strep throat

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## Diagnosis

Your doctor will conduct a physical exam, look for signs and symptoms of strep throat, and probably order one or more of the following tests:

- **Rapid antigen test.** Your doctor may perform a rapid antigen test on a swab sample from your throat. This test can detect strep bacteria in minutes by looking for substances (antigens) in the throat. If the test is negative but your doctor still suspects strep, he or she might do a throat culture.
- **Molecular (polymerase chain reaction, or PCR) test.** This test is also done using a swab sample from your throat.
- **Throat culture.** A sterile swab is rubbed over the back of the throat and

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gagging. The sample is then cultured in a laboratory for the presence of bacteria, but results can take as long as two days.

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## Treatment

Medications are available to cure strep throat, relieve its symptoms, and prevent its complications and spread.

### Antibiotics

If your doctor diagnoses you or your child with strep throat, your doctor will likely prescribe an oral antibiotic. If taken within 48 hours of the onset of the illness, antibiotics reduce the duration and severity of symptoms, as well as the risk of complications and the likelihood that infection will spread to others.

With treatment, you or your child should start feeling better in a day or two. Call your doctor if there's no improvement after taking antibiotics for 48 hours.

Children taking an antibiotic who feel well and don't have a fever often can return to school or child care when they're no longer contagious — usually 24 hours after beginning treatment. But be sure to finish all the medicine. Stopping early can lead to recurrences and serious complications, such as rheumatic fever or kidney inflammation.

### Symptom relievers

To relieve throat pain and reduce fever, try over-the-counter pain relievers, such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others) or acetaminophen (Tylenol, others).

Use caution when giving aspirin to children or teenagers. Though aspirin is

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aspirin has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a rare but potentially life-threatening condition, in such children.

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## More Information

[Recurring strep throat: When is tonsillectomy useful?](#)

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## Self care

In most cases, antibiotics will quickly wipe out the bacteria causing the infection. In the meantime, try these tips to relieve symptoms of strep throat:

[Get the facts about strep throat: Symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention](#)

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home until there's no sign of fever, and he or she feels better and has taken an antibiotic for at least 24 hours.

- **Drink plenty of water.** Keeping a sore throat lubricated and moist eases swallowing and helps prevent dehydration.
- **Eat soothing foods.** Easy-to-swallow foods include broths, soups, applesauce, cooked cereal, mashed potatoes, soft fruits, yogurt and soft-cooked eggs. You can puree foods in a blender to make them easier to swallow. Cold foods, such as sherbet, frozen yogurt or frozen fruit pops also may be soothing. Avoid spicy foods or acidic foods such as orange juice.
- **Gargle with warm salt water.** For older children and adults, gargling several times a day can help relieve throat pain. Mix 1/4 teaspoon (1.5 grams) of table salt in 8 ounces (237 milliliters) of warm water. Be sure to tell your child to spit out the liquid after gargling.
- **Honey.** Honey can be used to soothe sore throats. Don't give honey to children younger than 12 months.
- **Use a humidifier.** Adding moisture to the air can help ease discomfort. Choose a cool-mist humidifier and clean it daily because bacteria and molds can flourish in some humidifiers. Saline nasal sprays also help keep mucous membranes moist.
- **Stay away from irritants.** Cigarette smoke can irritate a sore throat and increase the likelihood of infections such as tonsillitis. Avoid fumes from paint or cleaning products, which can irritate the throat and lungs.

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## Preparing for your appointment

What you can do

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- **Symptoms you or your child has**, including any that seem unrelated to the reason for your appointment
- **Key personal information**, including major stresses, recent life changes, family medical history and possible sources of recent infection
- **All medications, vitamins or other supplements** you or your child takes, including the doses
- **Questions to ask** your doctor

Take along a family member or friend, if possible, to help you remember the information you're given.

For strep throat, some basic questions to ask your doctor include:

- What's likely causing these signs and symptoms?
- What are other possible causes?
- What tests are needed?
- What treatment approach do you recommend?
- How soon do you expect symptoms to improve with treatment?
- How long will this be contagious? When is it safe to return to school or work?
- What self-care steps might help?
- Is there a generic alternative to the medicine you're prescribing?

Don't hesitate to ask other questions.

### What to expect from your doctor

Your doctor is likely to ask a number of questions, including:

- When did the symptoms begin?

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- Have you or your child been exposed to anyone with strep throat in the last couple of weeks?
- Does anything seem to make the symptoms better or worse?
- Have you or your child been diagnosed with strep throat in the past? When? How was it treated?
- Have you or your child been diagnosed with any other medical conditions?

### What you can do in the meantime

If you think you or your child might have a strep infection, take steps to relieve symptoms and avoid spreading infection:

- **Keep your hands clean**, cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, and don't share personal items.
- **Gargle** with 1/4 teaspoon (1.5 grams) of table salt in 8 ounces (237 milliliters) of warm water.
- **Rest, drink fluids, eat soft foods and take pain relievers**, such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others) or acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) to help ease symptoms.

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By Mayo Clinic Staff

Nov 30, 2022

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