



Sore Throat

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Introduction

Sore throat, also known as pharyngitis, is characterised by pain, scratchiness or irritation of the throat which often worsens with swallowing. Most sore throats are caused by viral infections and pass in three to seven days. Some sore throats are caused by a bacterial infection and fever may be present. Antibiotic therapy may be required to treat bacterial pharyngitis.

Causes of sore throat

Sore throat may result from a number of causes, and the symptoms experienced may vary depending on the cause.

Viruses which cause the common cold or flu are often responsible for a sore throat. The virus is usually transmitted by someone who is already infected, and the condition is spread when droplets containing the cold virus are carried into the air as one coughs, sneezes or speaks. Breathing in one of these droplets may cause a sore throat which is accompanied by a runny nose, cough, fever, headache and body pain.

Other viral conditions which may be associated with a sore throat include:

- Laryngitis – a hoarse voice, dry cough and a constant need to clear one's throat may be experienced .
- Glandular fever – the patient may feel tired and have a fever and swollen glands in the neck.
- Tonsillitis – this occurs when the tonsils, which are two lumps of tissue on either side of the throat, become inflamed. Swallowing is uncomfortable, and there may be fever. Less commonly, tonsillitis may be caused by a bacterial infection.

- Pharyngitis – this refers to the inflammation at the back of the throat (oropharynx) which occurs with a viral or bacterial infection.

Bacteria which are associated with a sore throat often belong to the streptococcal group. The most common of these is *Streptococcus pyogenes* which is responsible for "strep throat". This condition may be accompanied by fever and swollen glands in the neck. Antibiotics are required to treat a strep throat.

Non-infectious causes of sore throat include:

- Allergies to pet dander, moulds, dust and pollen
- Dry indoor air
- Irritants such as air pollution and tobacco smoke

Management

There are a variety of preparations available over-the-counter (OTC) which may alleviate the symptoms of a sore throat. These include:

Oral analgesic and anti-inflammatory preparations

Simple analgesics such as paracetamol, aspirin and ibuprofen provide rapid and effective relief of sore throat, and should be considered as first-line treatment. Aspirin should be avoided in patients under the age of 16 years because of its association with Reye's syndrome.

Topical agents

Topical agents which may relieve a sore throat include analgesics, local anaesthetics, and anti-infectives (antiseptics). These are available as mouth washes, sprays and lozenges and come as single ingredient formulations or in combination.

Table 1. Topical agents used OTC for the treatment of sore throat

| Agent | Action |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Benzdyamine | Analgesic |
| Benzdyamine with chlorhexidine | Analgesic and anti-infective |
| Flurbiprofen | Analgesic and anti-inflammatory |
| Benzocaine | Local anaesthetic |
| Cetylpyridinium chloride | Anti infective |
| Cetylpyridinium with benzocaine | Anti-infective and local anaesthetic |
| Chlorhexidine | Anti-infective |
| Chlorhexidine with benzocaine | Anti-infective and local anaesthetic |
| Dichlorobenzyl alcohol with amylmetacresol | Anti-infective |
| Dichlorobenzyl alcohol/ amylmetacresol with lidocaine or menthol | Anti-infective and local analgesic |
| Phenol | Anti-infective |
| Dequalinium chloride | Antiseptic and antifungal |

Note:

The manufacturers' recommendations regarding the use of an OTC product should be carefully read and observed. Cognisance should be taken as to the suitability of the product for children.

Lozenges, hard sweets or ice cubes should not be given to children younger than five years because of the risk of choking. Children younger than six years are not usually able to gargle properly. In general, sprays are not recommended for children.

Home remedies

Gargle with salt water. Make a suitable solution by dissolving half a teaspoonful of salt in a glass of warm water and gargle as often as necessary. Drink plenty of cool or warm liquids. Adults and older children could suck ice cubes or hard sweets.

Prevention

The spread of a sore throat can be limited by practising good hand hygiene, and keeping surfaces clean and free of germs. An alcohol-based sanitiser can be used if soap and water

are not available. Avoid close contact with people who are ill. Cough or sneeze into a tissue, and then dispose of it. If necessary, sneeze into your elbow.

See a doctor if:

- There is no improvement in symptoms after a week
- A high temperature is present
- The sore throat is severe or there is difficulty in swallowing
- Hoarseness is present which has lasted longer than three weeks.

Conclusion

In most cases, sore throat is a symptom of a viral or bacterial infection. Often these infections are self-limiting, and last less than a week. Symptoms of sore throat may be relieved by using suitable OTC medication, or by applying self-help measures. Medical help should be sought if there is no improvement after appropriate treatment.

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