



Soothe the swallow: relief of pharyngitis and tonsillitis

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Introduction

Patients will most often visit a pharmacy as the first port of call to seek symptomatic relief of a sore throat. Pharyngitis, the medical term for a sore throat, is inflammation of the pharynx (the back of the throat). When the tonsils become inflamed, it is known as tonsillitis. In some cases, both the pharynx and the tonsils become inflamed, this is known as pharyngotonsillitis.

Causes

Pharyngitis or tonsillitis occur as a result of an infection that leads to inflammation. There are many different causes of throat infections. However, the majority (approximately 90%) of the infections are due to viruses. Only a small percentage of throat infections occur as a result of a bacterial infection. Viruses that can cause pharyngitis or tonsillitis include:

- Common cold viruses (e.g. coronavirus, rhinovirus)
- Influenza (flu) virus
- Epstein-Barr virus

A bacterial cause of pharyngitis or tonsillitis is most commonly due to Group A *Streptococcus* (GAS). Other less common causes may be fungal or parasitic infections.

Symptoms

Symptoms of pharyngitis or tonsillitis may include:

- Cold symptoms (congestion, cough)
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Stomach ache

- Fever
- Painful swallowing
- Hoarseness
- Nausea and/or vomiting

Management

Management of pharyngitis or tonsillitis will depend on the cause. Often, a viral throat infection will resolve on its own within a week or so. However, it is important to know when to refer the patient to a doctor for further investigation, as a bacterial throat infection caused by GAS requires management with antibiotics.

Refer the patient to the doctor if the patient has:

- Difficulty in swallowing, or if the pain in the throat is severe
- A fever persisting more than 5 days
- A sore throat lasting more than 10 days
- A rash
- Difficulty breathing

Viral throat infections do not respond to antibiotics and symptoms may be relieved with over-the-counter (OTC) medications.

Treatment

OTC medications for pharyngitis or tonsillitis are aimed at providing relief of the symptoms.

- Paracetamol or ibuprofen can be used for relief of pain or fever.
- Gargles, lozenges and throat sprays may provide symptomatic relief of a sore throat.

Lozenges, gargles, or throat sprays available OTC may contain:

- An antiseptic (e.g. chlorhexidine gluconate, cetylpyridium chloride)
- An anaesthetic (e.g. benzocaine, lidocaine)
- An anti-inflammatory (e.g. benzydamine, flurbiprofen)
- A combination of these ingredients

Table 1 lists some of the OTC products available for symptomatic relief of a sore throat.

Table I: Some OTC products available for symptomatic relief of a sore throat

Product*	Composition	Anti-inflammatory	Antiseptic	Pain relief
Andolex® gargle, spray Throflam® gargle, spray	Benzylamine	✓		✓
Andolex C® oral rinse, spray, lozenges Oranix® gargle, spray Throflam-Co® gargle, spray	Benzylamine Chlorhexidine gluconate	✓	✓	✓
Cepacol® lozenges	Cetylpyridinium chloride Benzyl alcohol		✓	✓
Coryx® Throat solution, spray	Benzocaine Chlorhexidine gluconate		✓	✓
Endcol® lozenges Medi-Keel A® lozenges	Cetylpyridinium chloride Benzocaine		✓	✓
Medi-Keel A® gargle	Dibucaine Benzocaine Cetylpyridinium chloride Benzyl alcohol		✓	✓
Medi-Keel A® spray	Phenol		✓	✓
Orochlor® solution, spray	Benzocaine Chlorhexidine gluconate		✓	✓
Strepsils® lozenges	Dichlorobenzyl alcohol Almetacresol		✓	
Strepsils® Plus	Dichlorobenzyl alcohol Almetacresol Lidocaine		✓	✓
Strepsils® Intensive lozenges	Flurbiprofen	✓		✓

Table adapted from: Van Schoor J. Colds, flu and coughing: over-the-counter products for pharyngitis and tonsillitis. *South African Family Practice*. 2013;55(4):330-3.

*Always refer to the package inserts for manufacturer's instructions for use.

Other supportive measures include:

- Encouraging rest
- Encouraging increased fluid intake
- Gargling with salt water
- Sucking on ice chips or ice lollies for children
- Sipping warm beverages, such as tea or soup

The choice of OTC medications for the management of pharyngitis or tonsillitis depends on:

- The patient's age – children under six years of age can usually not gargle properly, and lozenges may provide a choking hazard in children under five years of age.
- The patient's symptoms
- The patient's preference

Conclusion

Viral throat infections typically last for four to five days. Antibiotics are not an effective treatment for viral throat infections and are managed symptomatically. A bacterial throat infection may last longer and often requires the use of an antibiotic. Most cases of pharyngitis and tonsillitis are viral and resolve on their own. However, it is crucial to know when to refer the patient to a doctor for treatment, as untreated bacterial pharyngitis or tonsillitis may lead to complications.

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