

Sore throat – conditions and treatment

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Introduction

A sore throat or pharyngitis is discomfort, scratchiness or irritation in the throat. The pain often worsens when swallowing.^{1,2} A sore throat usually resolves on its own without complications in adults, although it is important to know when to seek medical attention.^{3,4}

Causes

A sore throat is normally caused by a viral infection. It may be caused by the viruses responsible for colds and flu-like illnesses. Sometimes, a sore throat is caused by the bacteria ***Streptococcus pyogenes*** (*Strep* throat).^{2,5}

Sore throat symptoms

Signs and symptoms of a sore throat may vary depending on the cause. They include¹⁻³:

- Pain or a scratchy sensation in the throat
- Pain that worsens with swallowing or talking
- Difficulty swallowing
- Swollen, red tonsils
- Cough, hoarseness or a muffled voice

Duration

Most sore throats are self-limiting.⁴ Sore throat caused by a viral infection usually lasts four to five days.³ If the symptoms have been present for longer, the patient should be referred to the doctor for further advice. When the sore throat is described as being extremely painful, especially in the absence of a cold, cough and catarrhal symptoms (i.e. nasal symptoms associated with excess mucus secretion), referral to the doctor is recommended if there is no improvement in symptoms within 24–48 hours.^{3,4}

Treatment of a sore throat

Sore throat caused by a virus may be treated with rest, pain medication, and other therapies aimed at relieving symptoms.³

Referral pointers for *Strep* throat:

Approximately 10 percent of adults with a sore throat have *Strep* throat. Signs and symptoms of *Strep* throat may include the following^{3,4}:

- Pain in the throat
- White patches of pus on the side or back of the throat
- Fever (temperature greater than 38 °C)
- Enlarged lymph glands in the neck
- No cough, runny nose, or irritation/redness of the eyes

Strep throat is treated with a course of antibiotics prescribed by the doctor.³

Conclusion

Most minor sore throat conditions that present in the pharmacy will be caused by a viral infection. Once more serious conditions have been excluded, an appropriate OTC medicine may be recommended. Hand-washing is an essential and highly effective way to prevent the spread of infection. The pharmacist's assistant should recommend that the patient wash their hands regularly with water and soap. Alcohol-based hand rubs are a good alternative for disinfecting hands if a sink is not available.

Table I. Treatment options to help relieve sore throat symptoms

The following treatments may help to provide relief of sore throat pain:

Pain medication

Over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers such as paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen have been shown to provide rapid and effective relief of sore throat pain.^{3,4,6,7} Avoid aspirin in children under 16 years of age as it has been associated with a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome when it is used to treat viral infections.⁷

Mouth and throat preparations

Patients should be reminded that mouthwashes and gargles should not be swallowed. Manufacturers' recommendations about whether to use the mouthwash diluted or undiluted should be checked and appropriate advice given to the patient.⁴ Lozenges and lollies may persist longer in the throat than sprays or gargles and, thus, may be more effective for symptom relief.³ Do not give lozenges to young children as they are a choking hazard.⁷ Goldex throat lollies are a safer alternative in younger children.

Several preparations are available alone or in combination with other agents. They include:

Benzocaine or lidocaine

These are local anaesthetic agents that numb the throat and help to ease soreness and pain.^{4,8}

Benzydamine hydrochloride

A locally-acting nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug with anaesthetic and analgesic properties.

Cetylpyridium chloride

An antiseptic used for treatment of superficial infections of the throat.^{4,8}

Chlorhexidine gluconate

A broad spectrum antiseptic and disinfectant agent.⁸

Dequalinium chloride

An antibacterial and antifungal agent.⁸

Dichlorobenzyl alcohol

It is available in combination with amylmetacresol in lozenge preparations used for minor infections of the throat.⁸

Povidine-iodine

It is used for inflammatory conditions of the mouth and throat caused by bacterial infections.⁸

The following tips may help improve symptoms of sore throat:

- Rest the voice.⁶
- Sip warm beverages (e.g. honey or lemon tea, chicken soup), cold beverages, or eat cold or frozen desserts (e.g., ice-cream, popsicles).^{3,6,7}
- Gargle with warm, salty water.^{1,3,5}
- Use of a cool-mist vaporiser or humidifier may moisten the air and soothe a dry and painful throat.^{1,6,7}
- Keep the home free from cigarette smoke and cleaning products that may irritate the throat.^{5,6}

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