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Is Your **Sore Throat** a Cold, Strep Throat, or Tonsillitis?

Got a [sore throat](#)? Wonder if your painful sore throat is from a cold, [strep throat](#), or [tonsillitis](#)? Here's how to tell.

What's the Difference Between a Cold, Strep Throat, and Tonsillitis?

A sore throat is often the first sign of a cold. However, a sore throat from a cold often gets better or goes away after the first day or two. Other [cold symptoms](#) such as a runny nose and congestion may follow the sore throat.

Strep throat, which is caused by *Streptococcus* bacteria, is one of the major causes of sore throats and tonsillitis. With strep throat, the sore throat is often more severe and persists. While a cold goes away on its own, strep throat usually requires antibiotics.

Tonsillitis is a painful infection of the tonsils, the tissue masses located at the back of the throat.

Is a Sore Throat With a Cold Caused by a Virus or Bacteria?

Sore throats can be caused by viruses or bacteria. To determine the cause of your sore throat, your doctor may do a strep test. However, there may be some clues. Viral sore throats are often accompanied by other cold symptoms that may include a runny nose, [cough](#), red or watery eyes, and sneezing.

Along With a Sore Throat, What are Other Cold Symptoms?

In addition to a sore throat, other common cold symptoms include:

- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Cough
- Headache
- Nasal congestion
- Fever, which may or may not be present and which is more likely in children

How Are Sore Throats With Colds Treated?

While there is no cure for a sore throat caused by a cold virus, to speed healing of your sore throat and cold, be sure to get enough rest. Eating a healthy diet and drinking plenty of fluids can also help speed healing.

Can Medications Relieve Symptoms of a Sore Throat With a Cold?

Over-the-counter cold [medications](#) may relieve cold and sore throat symptoms. However, the benefits of these drugs are minimal. Some cold medications include:

- Pain relievers, such as [acetaminophen](#) and [ibuprofen](#), to relieve the aches and pains of a cold and sore throat. ([Aspirin](#) should **not** be given to children under the age of 18 because of its link to [Reye's syndrome](#), a disorder that mostly affects children 4 to 12 years old and causes brain damage and death.)
- Sore throat sprays and lozenges to soothe your throat and numb the throat pain temporarily.
- Decongestant nasal sprays to relieve a sore throat caused by postnasal drip -- nasal drainage that runs down your throat. (Be sure to stop using nasal decongestant sprays after three days, or you may have an increase in congestion when you stop them.)

Antibiotics should not be used to treat a cold virus and sore throat. Antibiotics are effective only against bacteria. They will not work on sore throats associated with colds, which are caused by viruses, and may cause future infections to be worse and last longer.

How Is Strep Throat Different From a Sore Throat With a Cold?

Strep throat, an infection in the throat and tonsils, is caused by the *Streptococcus* bacterium. Strep throat spreads by having close contact with an infected person and/or sharing an infected person's personal items. While strep throat is common in children ages 5 to 13, it also occurs in adults.

Is Strep Throat More Serious Than a Sore Throat With a Cold?

Strep throat can cause more serious illnesses, such as rheumatic [fever](#), a disease that may harm the heart valves. That's why it's important to get proper medical treatment. With proper treatment, strep throat is usually cured within 10 days.

Are Strep Throat Symptoms Different From a Sore Throat With a Cold?

Strep throat symptoms are oftentimes more severe than symptoms of a sore throat with a cold and may include the following:

- Sudden sore throat
- Loss of appetite
- Painful swallowing
- Red tonsils with white spots
- Fever
- Headache



Do I Need to See my Doctor if I Think I Have Strep Throat?

If you have symptoms of strep throat, visit your health care provider. You will be examined and may be given a strep test. If signs of strep throat are very clear, your health care provider may start antibiotic treatment immediately.

What Is a Strep Test for a Sore Throat?

A strep test looks for *Streptococcus* bacteria in the throat. The test is painless and takes very little time. The tip of a cotton swab is used to wipe the back of the throat. The swab is then tested. If the strep test is positive, you have strep throat. If the strep test is negative, no signs of *Streptococcus* were found. Still, the throat culture is not always correct. If there are strong signs of strep throat, your health care provider may decide to start treatment, even if the test was negative.

What Is the Treatment for Strep Throat?

Strep throat is treated using antibiotics, which kill the bacteria causing the infection. Antibiotics are often taken as pills or given as a shot. [Penicillin](#) and [amoxicillin](#) are common antibiotics used to treat strep throat. Other antibiotics are prescribed for people who are allergic to penicillin.

Antibiotics for strep throat are usually taken for seven to 10 days. Follow your health care provider's instructions. Take all of the medication, even if you feel better. You should feel better within a day or two, but the bacteria can still be alive even if you feel okay.

What if my Strep Throat Isn't Getting Better?

If your strep throat is not getting better, let your health care provider know right away. Do not stop taking your medicine unless your health care provider tells you to. Call your health care provider if these strep throat symptoms occur:

- Fever one or two days after feeling better
- Nausea or vomiting
- Earache
- Headache
- Skin [rash](#)
- Cough
- Swollen glands
- Painful joints
- Shortness of breath
- Dark urine, rash, or chest pain (may occur three to four weeks later)

How Is Tonsillitis Different Than a Sore Throat With a Cold?

Sometimes a sore throat is caused by tonsillitis, an inflammation of the tonsils. Tonsillitis can be caused by viruses or bacteria. While the tonsils' job is to help fight infection, the tonsils can also become infected. When they do, the result is tonsillitis and a very painful sore throat.

How Are Tonsillitis Symptoms Different Than Symptoms of a Sore Throat With a Cold?

In addition to a sore throat, a cold usually causes nasal symptoms, such as runny nose or congestion. With tonsillitis, your tonsils become swollen and may have telltale white or yellow spots. Other symptoms with tonsillitis include the following:

- Bad breath
- Fever
- Voice changes because of swelling
- Painful swallowing
- Swollen lymph glands in neck

How Is a Sore Throat From Tonsillitis Treated?

If the tonsillitis infection is bacterial like strep throat, then antibiotics are given. If the tonsillitis infection is viral, antibiotics will not help. The virus must run its course for the sore throat to resolve. For either type of throat infection, the following treatment measures may help:

- Getting plenty of rest
- Drinking lots of fluid
- Eating smooth, soothing foods like gelatin, ice cream, shakes, frozen desserts, and soup
- Avoiding crunchy or spicy foods
- Using a vaporizer
- Taking over-the-counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen, [naproxen](#), or ibuprofen. Children should NOT take aspirin.

If antibiotics do not cure the bacterial tonsil infection, if the tonsillitis infections occur repeatedly, or if the tonsils are interfering with [sleep](#) and breathing, the doctor may recommend a tonsillectomy, which is the surgical removal of the tonsils.