



SORE, SCRATCHY THROAT? SOOTHING PAIN FROM ILLNESS OR ALLERGY

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It's a familiar sensation as the days grow shorter and colder: a scratchy, painful feeling when you swallow, talk, or even just breathe. Sometimes, a sore throat is little more than a nuisance. But it can also be a sign of serious infection. So how do you know which is which? And what can you do to soothe a sore throat?

Many things can trigger a sore throat, explains Dr. Alison Han, an infectious disease expert at the NIH Clinical Center. "It can be an allergen. It can be an infection, like a virus or bacteria. Sometimes, it's even just dry air," she says.

So, when should you call your health care provider? That depends on how bad the sore throat is and what symptoms come with it, Han explains. "If it's a mild sore throat and a runny nose, some congestion, that's probably a typical cold," she says. But severe pain plus symptoms like a high fever and a loss of interest in eating or drinking may be serious.

How long a sore throat lasts also matters. "If it's been more than three days, then you might want to seek medical advice," Han says. "But at any time, it's always reasonable to call your doctor and get an opinion."

A very contagious bacterial infection called strep can cause a sore throat, high fever, and swollen glands. Children may also have nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain. Strep can cause other serious health problems. So it's important to see a doctor as soon as possible if you think someone in your household has strep.

If test results confirm strep, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics. Even if you feel better after a few days, it's important to finish the entire prescription. Most causes of a sore throat, though, don't need antibiotics. These include allergies as well as colds, flu, COVID-19, and RSV, which are all caused by viruses. Antibiotics only work against bacteria. Doctors can sometimes prescribe antiviral medication for certain viruses, like flu or COVID-19.

There is no treatment for the common cold, but over-the-counter products for symptom relief may help. For example, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or aspirin (not for kids) can reduce pain. Mild allergies can be treated using over-the-counter antihistamines, decongestants, or nasal sprays. But you may need prescription medication or allergy shots for severe allergies.

A sore throat is a common symptom for the current variants of COVID-19. "If you have a sore throat and some other cold-like symptoms, it's reasonable to do a COVID-19 test," Han says. This can help you stop spreading the disease to others.

For most causes of a sore throat, time is the best healer. Lozenges, lollipops, or other hard candies can help soothe your throat. Experts now recommend that children under the age of 4 don't use any over-the-counter cold and cough medications.

For young kids who might choke on candy, cold liquids or popsicles can help numb the pain.

The best way to prevent a sore throat is to avoid the germs that

cause them. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer often. Steer clear of other people who are sick. And stay up to date with the vaccines recommended for your age group, including flu, COVID-19, and RSV. "These shots can help protect ourselves and our loved ones," Han says.

SOOTHING A SORE THROAT

- Warm liquids can help. Try hot tea with lemon or gargling with warm salt water.
- Keep your throat moist with lozenges or hard candies. Do not give these to young kids.
- Ice chips or popsicles may help numb the pain.
- Painkillers like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can reduce throat pain. Read the label to make sure products are safe for children. Never give aspirin to kids.
- Keep the air in your bedroom moist with a clean humidifier or vaporizer.
- Avoid smoking or inhaling second-hand smoke. Smoke can irritate the throat.

RECOGNIZING RSV

RSV is usually more common in the fall, winter, and spring. Almost everyone catches RSV before the age of 2. It's one of the most common causes of illness in children. But unlike many other viruses that infect the lungs, you can catch RSV over and over again.

"RSV has a number of ways of evading the immune system," says Graham.

“So people are re-infected with RSV on average every three to 10 years.”

RSV infects the cells that line your lungs and breathing passages. Many symptoms mimic the common cold, like a runny nose, loss of appetite, and coughing or wheezing.

Symptoms usually stay mild in older children and adults. But some people are at risk of more serious disease. These include infants, older adults, and people with a weakened immune system.

Some people develop pneumonia or inflammation in the lungs from RSV. Watch for symptoms that get worse over time or trouble breathing or drinking fluids. People with these symptoms should see a health care provider right away. A blood test can show if you have RSV or another virus with similar symptoms.

For mild cases, over-the-counter fever or pain relievers may help reduce symptoms. But people with more serious cases may need treatment in a hospital.

RSV spreads easily between people. It can travel in droplets from a cough or sneeze. It can also stay on surfaces like doorknobs and tables. That means you can catch it if you touch an infected surface and then touch your face.

Most people who get mild RSV feel better in a week or two. But people can still spread it even after they stop showing symptoms.

STRENGTHEN YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM — 5 TIPS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

Don't smoke, and limit your alcohol.

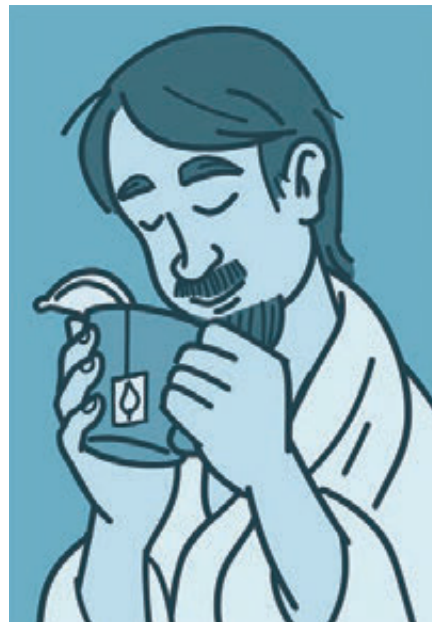
Your immune system is like an orchestra with different instruments working together. But smoking and drinking alcohol can be harmful and makes your body work harder.

Eat a healthy diet.

Your immune cells need energy and nutrients to work like they should. Eating foods with good sources of iron, vitamins A, C, D and E, and zinc are important to helping you strengthen your body.

Manage your stress.

When we're stressed, our bodies make a hormone called cortisol. Too much of it in your body for too long can cause inflammation. And stress also lowers the number of white blood cells that help fight infections.



Get good quality sleep.

Our immune system makes proteins called antibodies that help fight infections. If you lose too much sleep, your body can't make proteins which can lead to heart issues.

Make activity part of your daily routine. Your body makes proteins that help fight infection during and after exercise. And staying active circulates more white blood cells. So exercising helps your body get ready to fight disease and infection when needed.

What about vaccines?

Getting a vaccine is like having a dress rehearsal. It helps teach our immune system what germs are and how to fight them effectively. If you get infected with the actual disease later, your immune system is ready to go to work. So, it's important to stay up to date with recommended vaccines. MHBP covers vaccines recommended by the CDC at no additional cost to you when administered in an in-network vaccine pharmacy. Learn more about recommended vaccines by age group at: [CDC.gov/Vaccines/VPD/VaccinesAge.html](https://www.cdc.gov/Vaccines/VPD/VaccinesAge.html)

WHAT TO DO WHEN ANTIBIOTICS WON'T HELP?

- Get plenty of rest, stay home if you're sick
- Cover coughs, wash your hands often
- Drink lots of fluids
- Use a humidifier or cool vaporizer for congestion
- Try saline nose drops to relieve stuffiness and lozenges for a sore throat
- Ask your doctor about over the counter medications for congestion and cough or pain relievers, especially before giving to children
- Get your annual flu shot, and Covid vaccines as recommended

ADDITIONAL MHBP RESOURCES TO ASSIST YOU

MHBP has extensive resources to assist you and your family to support your optimal health!

If you have a health concern or need advice on what to do and where to go, MHBP offers a 24/7 Nurse Line, call 800-556-1555. If you have any questions or would like more information, please call MHBP at 800-410-7778.