pediatric associates
of austin, p.a.

Sore Throat (Pharyngitis)

Pharyngitis is throat pain, scratchiness, or irritation that often worsens with swallowing. It is very common in children and teens and is usually caused by an infection, though irritation or allergies can also play a role.

Common Causes of Sore Throats (by Age Group)

- Infants & Young Children (under 5 years):
  - Viral infections (common cold viruses)
  - Hand, foot, and mouth disease
  - Runny nose and post-nasal drip causing throat irritation
  - Bacterial strep throat is *less common* in this age group
- School-Age Children (5–12 years):
  - Viral infections (most common)
  - Strep throat becomes more common
  - Seasonal allergies with throat irritation
- Teens & Adolescents:
  - Viral infections
  - Strep throat
  - Mononucleosis (mono)
  - Irritation from smoke, vaping, or dry air

Viral vs. Bacterial Sore Throat: How Can You Tell?

More suggestive of a *viral* illness:

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Cough
- Hoarse voice
- Red or watery eyes
- Mouth sores
- Diarrhea

More suggestive of a *bacterial* illness (such as strep throat):

- Sudden onset sore throat
- Fever
- Pain with swallowing
- Red, swollen tonsils (**sometimes with white patches)**
- Tender, swollen lymph nodes in the neck
- No cough

Because symptoms can overlap, testing is often needed to confirm strep throat.

When to Come to the Office for Strep Testing

- Sore throat plus fever
- Sore throat without cough or cold symptoms
- Red, swollen tonsils or white patches
- Painful or swollen lymph nodes in the neck

How to Hold for a Strep Swab

Throat swabs can be uncomfortable and tricky if a child moves or gags. A simple trick is to have your child stick out their tongue and pant like a puppy or roar like a lion—this opens the mouth, lowers the tongue, and makes the swab quicker, safer, and more accurate. For younger kids, sitting on a parent's lap with a firm hug and arms gently restrained helps keep them still and reduces stress for everyone.

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Reference: Reference: Reference: AAP, Healthychilren.org

Home Care for Sore Throats

- Encourage fluids to prevent dehydration and rest
- Warm liquids (soup, tea) or cold treats (popsicles) for comfort
- Honey for cough or throat comfort (only for children over 1 year)
- Salt-water gargles (for older children and teens)
- Acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain or fever. Dosing is found on our website or
- Use a cool-mist humidifier if air is dry

How We Treat Strep Throat — and Why

≥ 3 years of age

- Strep throat is treated with antibiotics because they shorten the length of illness, reduce contagiousness, and prevent complications such **rheumatic fever**, which can affect the heart and joints if strep is untreated.
  - Even if symptoms improve quickly, it's important to **complete the entire prescribed antibiotic course.** This ensures bacteria eradication and lowers the risk of recurrence or rare complications such as rheumatic fever or kidney inflammation (post-streptococcal glomerulonephritis).

< 3 years of age

  - **Group A strep infections are rare** compared with older kids and teens.
  - The risk of serious complications like rheumatic fever is **very low in this age group**
  - Most sore throats in toddlers are **viral in origin**.
  - We **don't routinely swab every child under age 3** for strep unless there are strong clinical reasons to suspect it. If a swab is done and the result is positive, we discuss whether antibiotics make sense based on symptoms and exposure.

When it's Safe to Return to School

Children with strep throat are usually no longer contagious after 24 hours of antibiotics. To return to school they should also be fever-free, without fever reducers, and feeling better.

What About Mono (Mononucleosis)?

Mono is caused by a **virus (Epstein-Barr virus)** and **does not improve with antibiotics**. Testing for mono is either by blood draw sent to an outside lab or rapid in-office test using a finger-prick blood sample. Rapid testing is usually accurate after symptoms have been present > 7 days, so early testing is often deferred.

Who is most at risk:

- Teens and young adults
- Less common in younger children

Common symptoms:

- Severe sore throat
- Extreme fatigue (can last for weeks)
- Fever
- Swollen tonsils, often with white coating, and swollen lymph nodes in the neck
- Enlarged spleen or liver (sometimes). Because of the risk of **spleen enlargement**, teens diagnosed with mono may need **temporary restrictions on sports or strenuous activity** to prevent injury.

When to Go to the Emergency Room (ER)

- Trouble breathing or swallowing
- Drooling or inability to handle saliva
- Signs of dehydration (unable to urinate at least 3 times in 24 hrs, dry mouth, no tears)
- Neck stiffness with high fever
- Severe throat pain with muffled or "hot-potato" voice
- Extreme fatigue or abdominal pain (possible spleen involvement)