

Education

Viral Sore Throat

What is viral sore throat?

A viral sore throat is an infection of the throat caused by a virus.

How does it occur?

A viral sore throat occurs when a virus attacks the throat area. Many different viruses can cause a sore throat, including:

- flu viruses
- common cold viruses
- coxsackievirus (a virus that causes a throat infection called herpangina)
- infectious mononucleosis ("mono") virus.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms will vary slightly depending on which type of virus you have.

The symptoms of flu virus infections can include:

- sore throat
- cough
- fever.

The symptoms of infection with a cold virus can include:

- severe throat pain
- cold symptoms (runny nose, cough)
- white bumps on the tonsils
- mild soreness and swelling of the lymph nodes in your neck.

The symptoms of herpangina can include:

- sore throat
- fever
- headache
- poor appetite
- pain in the stomach, neck, arms, and legs
- sores on the throat, tongue, or roof of the mouth that heal quickly.

The symptoms of infectious mononucleosis can include:

- fever
- extreme, prolonged fatigue lasting 1 or more weeks
- white coating on the tonsils and throat
- red spots on the roof of the mouth
- large swollen lymph nodes ("glands") in the neck

- faint red rash on the chest or whole body.

How is it diagnosed?

It is often hard to tell whether a sore throat is caused by a virus or by strep bacteria. In general, the main symptom of strep throat is a severe sore throat with trouble swallowing. Other possible symptoms of strep are fever, swollen lymph nodes in the neck, white spots on the tonsils, and sometimes headache. On the other hand, sneezing, a runny nose, and nasal congestion are common symptoms of infections by a virus, including those that cause sore throats.

To diagnose a viral sore throat, your health care provider will review your symptoms and examine you. He or she may also take a throat swab to check for strep throat. Many offices and clinics now have very accurate rapid throat swab tests that allow diagnosis of strep within a few minutes or a few hours.

If your provider suspects mononucleosis, a blood test may also be done.

How is it treated?

The treatment of a viral sore throat is similar to that of the common cold. Your health care provider will usually not prescribe antibiotics because antibiotics do not kill viruses. You can use analgesics to relieve minor pain. The treatment consists of gargling with warm water. Some people feel more relief with warm, salty water. Avoid contact with others until the symptoms are gone. Get plenty of bed rest or otherwise limit activity until the fever is gone.

Other possible treatment depends on the type of virus causing the infection.

How long will the effects last?

The effects will last as long as the virus affects the body. Most viral infections last from several days to 2 weeks. Mononucleosis may last longer.

How can I take care of myself?

To help take care of yourself, take the full course of treatment your health care provider prescribes.

For a sore throat:

- Drink chicken soup, cold drinks, and other clear, nutritious liquids. If it is painful to eat, don't eat solid food. When you can eat, eat healthy foods.
- Do not smoke cigarettes or breathe secondhand smoke.
- Gargle and spit with warm saltwater (1/2 teaspoon salt per cup of water) as often as is comfortable.
- Suck on hard lozenges or candy.
- Take acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen according to the directions on the package.
- Limit activities, especially those requiring talking.

If you have a fever:

- Ask your health care provider if you can take aspirin or acetaminophen to control your fever. Anyone under age 21 with a viral illness should not take aspirin because of the increased risk of Reye's syndrome.

If you have diarrhea:

- Drink clear liquids such as water, juice, tea, and bouillon often during the day.
- Reduce your normal activities until the diarrhea has stopped.
- If you are nauseated, suck on ice chips.
- When you feel better, eat cooked cereal, rice, applesauce, baked potato, and toast. You may also have carbonated drinks.
- Two or three days later, return to normal eating. Avoid alcohol, milk products, and highly seasoned and spicy foods for several more days.

Call your health care provider if:

- You have a severe sore throat for more than 48 hours.

- You have a fever, chills, or sweats.
- You have painful swollen neck glands (lymph nodes).
- You are unable to swallow or are not eating or drinking well.
- You have pus (white spots) on your tonsils.

How can I help prevent spread of viral sore throat?

If you have been diagnosed with a viral sore throat:

- Avoid close contact with others for about 24 to 48 hours. However, many viruses are most contagious before symptoms start.
- Use tissues when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands before touching food or food-related items such as dishes, glasses, silverware, or napkins.
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose.
- Use paper cups and paper towels in bathrooms instead of common drinking cups or shared hand towels.
- Don't share food or eating utensils with others.

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