

# TAKING CARE OF YOUR SORE THROAT

Humboldt State University, Student Health Center

2014

## THE MOST COMMON CAUSE: A VIRUS

Most sore throats are caused by one of hundreds of viruses, and are often the beginning of a “common cold.” In most cases, the soreness goes away as the cold progresses and seldom leads to further problems.

**Viral sore throats do not improve with antibiotics**, and there are no antiviral medicines currently available for them.

## HOW TO RELIEVE SYMPTOMS OF SORE THROAT

- ⇒ Gargle with mild salt water (one half teaspoon salt in 8 oz warm water)
- ⇒ Increase your fluid intake
- ⇒ Use throat lozenges or throat sprays or soothing herb teas with honey
- ⇒ Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) can help relieve pain and fever



## SORE THROAT

- Usually caused by a virus and usually resolves on its own.
- Symptoms that suggest a more serious cause: high fever, muffled voice, inability to swallow, neck stiffness, vomiting, asymmetrical tonsils.
- Protect yourself and others by washing hands frequently (or using hand sanitizer) & sneezing /coughing into your sleeve.
- Avoid any situation which could transfer saliva from a sick person to your mouth, such as sharing toothpaste, utensils, pipes, etc.

## STREP THROAT

About one in seven sore throats are caused by bacteria known as **group A streptococci**, or “**strep.**”

Strep throat can cause the same combination of symptoms as a viral sore throat and it can be hard to tell them apart by looking at your throat. Only a Strep test can tell them apart.

Strep infections differ from viral sore throats because, if not treated with antibiotics, they can rarely lead to more serious problems involving the joints, heart, and other tissues. Also, while the pain and other symptoms of strep throat will go away even without antibiotics, they may resolve a little more quickly with treatment, and you will no longer be contagious to others after 24 hours of antibiotics.



### SYMPTOMS THAT SUGGEST “STREP” *rather than a virus*

- High fever
- Absence of nasal congestion or cough
- Swollen, tender lymph nodes in the neck.

### HOW TO DIAGNOSE “STREP THROAT”

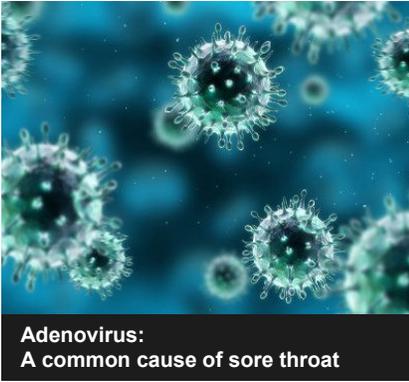
You cannot tell if you have Strep from the absence or presence of pus on the tonsils. At HSU, a Rapid Strep test (done on a throat swab) is used to diagnose strep throat infection. Results are back in one or two hours.

### TREATMENT of “STREP”

If the Rapid Strep test is positive, you will be prescribed an appropriate antibiotic for treatment. In order to prevent the complications mentioned above, ***if an antibiotic is prescribed, it is very important that you take it for the full course, even if the symptoms get better or go away.***



## SYMPTOMS WHICH SUGGEST THAT A SORE THROAT IS CAUSED BY A VIRUS:



- Cough
- Low-grade Fever
- Runny Nose
- Hoarseness/loss of voice

## SYMPTOMS WHICH SUGGEST A MORE SERIOUS CAUSE:

- High Fever
- Muffled Voice
- Vomiting
- Inability to Swallow
- Neck Stiffness
- Asymmetrical Tonsils (one side much more swollen) →



## SYMPTOMS THAT DO NOT HELP WITH THE DIAGNOSIS:

- Absence or presence of white spots on tonsils
- Mild to moderate trouble swallowing
- Color of sputum

## HOW TO PREVENT SORE THROATS

- Washing your hands or using hand sanitizer often can help you avoid getting these illnesses, especially in this campus setting where students live, eat and sit together in large groups.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sneezing, coughing or have sore throats.
- Avoid any situation which could transfer the saliva of a sick person to your mouth, such as using the same toothpaste tube or handling objects contaminated with saliva.
- A well-balanced diet, adequate water intake, regular exercise, and adequate sleep will help you stay healthy as well.

## GETTING HELP FOR YOUR SORE THROAT

**If your problem seems to be viral** (according to the symptoms already discussed), you can purchase over-the-counter remedies which may help you feel better. Our pharmacist will be happy to consult with you about what is available.

**If you suspect that you might have strep throat**, you may wish to come in and see our Triage Nurse for a Rapid Strep screen. No appointment necessary.

**If you have a very severe sore throat** which prevents you from even swallowing your own saliva, or the pain and swelling are severe on one side and not the other, or your voice is muffled, come in and be examined as soon as possible.

**Not sure?** If you are not sure what you might have, have additional symptoms, or just want to talk with a health care provider about your condition, call or come in and ask to be examined by our nurse.

## ANOTHER LESS COMMON CAUSE OF SORE THROATS: INFECTIOUS MONONUCLEOSIS (“MONO”)

Mono is an especially prolonged type of viral throat infection which most often occurs in young adults and teenagers. It ranges in severity from mild to severe. It is diagnosed with a blood test, though the test is not reliable until at least seven days after the illness has begun. If your sore throat lasts longer than one week and is not getting better, come in and get examined as it could be Mono. Since Mono is viral, antibiotics won't help, but there are some special considerations.

More info: <http://www.cdc.gov/epstein-barr/about-mono.html>

## ... AND ANOTHER EVEN LESS COMMON CAUSE: PERITONSILLAR ABSCESS

Occasionally, infection will occur not of the tonsils themselves, but of the area behind and to the side of the tonsils. This causes severe pain, usually on one side, with very swollen lymph nodes on the affected side, muffled voice, and inability to swallow. This condition usually benefits from early diagnosis and aggressive treatment, which can help avoid the unpleasant necessity of having to have the abscess drained by a specialist.

More info: <http://www.webmd.com/oral-health/guide/peritonsillar-abscess?page=1>



### REMEMBER:

**Most sore throats are caused by a virus.  
Antibiotics will not work on viruses.**

**Only a few people with a sore throat will need  
Strep screening, antibiotics or other prescription medicines.**

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