

I'VE GOT A SORE THROAT: WILL AN ANTIBIOTIC MAKE ME BETTER?

Some information to help you in the next week or so

What is a "sore throat"?

Sore throat is a very common infection caused by bacteria or viruses. It is usually part of a simple illness such as the common cold but rarely may be a symptom of more severe illness such as glandular fever. The sore throat may be accompanied by sniffles, cough and generally feeling weak and feverish.

Bacteria and viruses infect the tissues at the back and sides of the throat. The body makes antibodies to the infection, and this may cause the glands (lymph nodes) in the neck to swell and become tender.

Most people (90%) are over their infection by one week. Half are better by about 3½ days.

Will antibiotics help a sore throat?

Traditionally doctors have prescribed antibiotics to kill any bacteria in the throat. However recent research has suggested that antibiotics do not make much difference to symptoms.

In fact they only shorten the time you are unwell by 16 hours overall. You have a 50% chance of being better in 3½ days without antibiotics, and 2½ days with them. In either case – with or without antibiotics – you have a 90% chance of being better in 7 days.

There are some rare complications, however they are so rare that it is not necessary to use antibiotics routinely to prevent them unless you are in a special risk group (which your doctor can advise you about).

What are the disadvantages of antibiotics?

- Antibiotics can have unpleasant side effects (for example, thrush, rashes, tummy upsets and diarrhoea).
- Taking antibiotics when you don't need them isn't sensible.
- Overusing antibiotics produces resistant germs, which means the antibiotics may not work when they are really needed.

Your doctor has examined you during your visit to the surgery and, even though you feel unwell, he or she hasn't found any serious illness that definitely needs antibiotics today.

So, your sore throat will quite likely get better without antibiotics. However, your doctor may have given you a prescription to have available in case you do need antibiotics in the next few days. Follow your doctor's advice as to whether to get them; the prescription should only be used for this episode of illness.

When should I return to my doctor?

If **you** feel your illness is getting worse.

If **you** feel your sore throat is getting worse.

If you are not better in _____ days / hours.

If you do use antibiotics, do take the FULL course.

Is there anything I should look out for?

Should you find that you develop any new or worrying symptoms, or if symptoms persist telephone the surgery and make an appointment for a further check-up.

Ways to help your sore throat

1. Pain relief may be the most effective thing to do. Take paracetamol or aspirin (for adults). Check the package for dosing instructions.
2. Some people find sucking a lozenge or ice is soothing.



National Prescribing Service Limited

Level 7, 418A Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills 2010

Phone: 02 8217 8700

Practice stamp

This information sheet may be copied for patient use.

Adapted with permission from Professor Chris Del Mar, University of Queensland. April 2002.