Sore Throat

Sore throat is a common health problem, accounting for 2% of all ambulatory visits in the US. A sore throat is a symptom, not a disease. Pharyngitis is the medical term for sore throat. A sore throat may be the result of a bacterial or viral infection or it may be the result of irritation caused by smoking, excessive loud talking, overly dry heated rooms during the winter, or the result of secretions from the nose, sinuses, eyes and ears draining down the throat in association with a cold or allergy. A sore throat can be a symptom of other infections that may be going on. These could include the common cold, sinus infection, ear infection, dental infection, or infectious mononucleosis.

DIAGNOSIS

Only 10% of sore throats in adults are due to Group A Beta strep bacteria (usually called “strep throat”). Other bacteria may cause sore throat, including Chlamydia, gonorrhea, “non-A” (e.g. Group C or G) strep, Corynebacterium diphtheriae, mycoplasma, and fusobacterium. However, these bacteria may also be present in the pharynx (throat) without causing illness, complicating diagnosis. Viral causes of sore throat include HIV, herpes simplex, Epstein-Barr (mononucleosis) and many “cold” viruses.

Sore throat caused by Group A strep (“strep throat”) is treated with antibiotics to prevent heart and kidney damage. If your practitioner prescribes an antibiotic, it is important that you take the medication until it is gone to prevent these complications.

Sore throats due to other strep bacteria are not usually treated with antibiotics. Viral infections cannot be successfully treated with antibiotics. In fact, the CDC cites overtreatment of sore throat as one of the major causes of antibiotic abuse.

Rapid tests for strep A can be completed in about 30 minutes. Throat culture tests require 24 - 48 hours before results are available.

TREATMENT

- Drink lots of liquids - the best things are warm liquids such as hot tea, soup or lemonade (8-12 ounces per hour). Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Gargle with a solution of 1/2 teaspoon (or less) salt in an 8-ounce glass of warm water every 2-4 hours during the day, to help soothe the throat and wash away mucus.
- Suck on lozenges, hard candy or chew gum to help ease the pain.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Avoid inhalation of irritants, smoking or use of the voice. If you do speak, do not whisper.
- Steam helps soothe a dry and/or raw throat. Try standing in a hot, steamy shower or draping a towel over your head and holding it over a sink of steaming water. If you can afford it, buy a “cold mist” or “steam” vaporizer to add moisture to your room.
- Taking acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen will help relieve pain and fever.
- If your throat discomfort is worse at night because of mouth breathing, an antihistamine such as benadryl (diphenhydramine) may help with the nasal congestion and allow you to breathe through your nose.

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS

If you drool, cannot swallow, cannot speak clearly, or cannot open your mouth normally, seek care ASAP. If a throat culture was taken and the results indicate you need antibiotic treatment, you will be notified by a McKinley provider. If your sore throat has not resolved in seven days or it gets worse you should call and see if you should be seen again.

Resources:

Up to Date website, http://www.uptodate.com/patients/index.html, search for “pharyngitis”.

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu

sore_throat

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