Strep Throat vs. Sore Throat

You start feeling pain or tingling in your throat and it hurts to swallow. Is it just a sore throat or is it strep throat? Do you just need to rest or do you need to see your doctor?

A sore throat can have a variety of causes—including viral infections (like a cold), pollution, allergies, and heartburn. Strep throat, however, is a severe kind of sore throat caused by bacteria called group A Streptococcus or group A strep. Understanding the differences between strep throat and a sore throat is important.

When you have a sore throat accompanied by a runny nose, cough, sneezing, headache and a mild fever, you most likely have a virus or allergies. Strep throat causes the tissue in the back of the throat and the tonsils to become bright red and inflamed. White or yellow patches may also be seen. Strep throat also causes sudden severe pain making swallowing difficult. Other symptoms of strep throat include fever over 101° F, fatigue, headache, stomach ache and rash.

If you're experiencing these symptoms in addition to a sore throat, your doctor will need to do a rapid strep test or a throat culture to determine if group A strep is present.

Strep throat usually lasts only 3-5 days, but antibiotics are important to prevent complications like scarlet fever and rheumatic fever. Most people feel better 1-2 days after starting antibiotics. You need to continue to take all of the antibiotics until the prescription is complete, even if you are feeling better. While antibiotics are very effective at treating strep throat, they do not help sore throats due to other causes. The majority of sore throats are due to viral infections and will not be helped by antibiotics.

The following for treatments can help soothe the symptoms of sore throat, whether caused by strep throat or not: -

* Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids to keep the throat moist.
* Use a humidifier.
* Gargle with saltwater to help clear post-nasal drip, which can irritate the throat.
* Use throat lozenges and warm liquids such as tea with honey to soothe your throat.
* Use acetaminophen or ibuprofen to treat pain or very high fevers. Check with your doctor or pharmacist to make sure these over-the-counter pain medications are safe for you.

Strep throat is highly contagious and can be spread through airborne droplets. Frequent hand washing is the first line of defense against germs! Students may return to school once they have been fever free without the use of fever reducing medication and have been taking antibiotics for at least 24 hours. With viral infections like colds, you are contagious as long as the symptoms last.