
Sore Throats: Does My Child Need Antibiotics?

Does my child need antibiotics? We hear this question almost every day and often for one of the most common complaints -- a sore throat. A sore throat is a common childhood ailment with many possible causes: infection of the throat or tonsils (glands located in the back of the throat), dry winter weather, or postnasal drip. Most sore throats are not serious and will heal on their own without antibiotics. Nevertheless, a child's sore throat should not be taken lightly - it may be a more serious condition known as Strep throat.

Strep throat is a type of infection caused by a bacterium called streptococcus. Strep throat must be treated with antibiotics. It can lead to serious complications including swollen tonsils, ear infection, rheumatic heart disease (which causes heart valve damage), and kidney disease.

To be safe, call us in all cases of sore throat. It is difficult sometimes to determine whether the cause of a sore throat is a virus or the streptococcus bacterium. Both viruses and Strep throat can cause painful swallowing, fever, fiery red throats, pus-like discharge from the back of the throat, and swollen and tender glands.

We will look for certain clues to determine which one it is. There are a few differences between viral sore throat and Strep throat. Most cases of Strep throat occur in the winter or spring and in children over 3.

Unlike a viral infection, Strep throat is rarely associated with cold symptoms such as cough, runny nose, and red eyes. Frequently, a particular virus is going around and we will be able to recognize its symptoms in your child. When we are concerned about Strep throat we will most likely do a throat swab to distinguish between a virus and streptococcus.

The "quick strep" tests are fast and give us an answer in about five minutes. Unfortunately, they are not perfectly sensitive and will miss two to four percent of strep cases. Therefore, you will notice that we do a double swab. If the quick test is negative, we do a throat culture. If that culture is positive, we will call within 48 hours and prescribe antibiotics.

If your child has a negative Strep test and culture and cold or flu-like complaints, then a viral infection is probably the cause. You should not be too concerned - most viral infections clear up in about a week. Antibiotics won't help; fever medicine, fluids, and rest are the best medicines to relieve the symptoms and aid the natural healing process.