



Pharyngitis



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What is pharyngitis?

Pharyngitis is inflammation of the pharynx, which is in the back of the throat. It's most often referred to simply as "sore throat." Pharyngitis can also cause scratchiness in the throat and difficulty swallowing.

According to the American Osteopathic Association (AOA), pharyngitis-induced sore throat is one of the most common reasons for doctor visits. More cases of pharyngitis occur during the colder months of the year. It's also one of the most common reasons why people stay home from work. In order to properly treat a sore throat, it's important to identify its cause. Pharyngitis may be caused by bacterial or viral infections.

Causes of pharyngitis

There are numerous viral and bacterial agents that can cause pharyngitis. They include:

- ✚ measles
- ✚ adenovirus, which is one of the causes of the common cold
- ✚ chickenpox
- ✚ croup, which is a childhood illness distinguished by a barking cough
- ✚ whooping cough
- ✚ group A *streptococcus*

Viruses are the most common cause of sore throats. Pharyngitis is most commonly caused by viral infections such as the common cold, influenza, or mononucleosis. Viral infections don't respond to antibiotics, and treatment is only necessary to help relieve symptoms.



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Less commonly, pharyngitis is caused by a bacterial infection. Bacterial infections require antibiotics. The most common bacterial infection of the throat is strep throat, which is caused by group A *streptococcus*. Rare causes of bacterial pharyngitis include gonorrhea, chlamydia, and *Corynebacterium*.

Frequent exposure to colds and flus can increase your risk for pharyngitis. This is especially true for people with jobs in healthcare, allergies, and frequent sinus infections. Exposure to secondhand smoke may also raise your risk.

What are the symptoms of pharyngitis?

The incubation period is typically two to five days. Symptoms that accompany pharyngitis vary depending on the underlying condition.

In addition to a sore, dry, or scratchy throat, a cold or flu may cause:

- ✚ sneezing
- ✚ runny nose
- ✚ headache
- ✚ cough
- ✚ fatigue
- ✚ body aches
- ✚ chills
- ✚ fever (a low-grade fever with a cold and higher-grade fever with the flu)

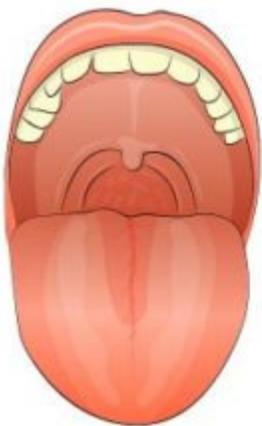
In addition to a sore throat, the symptoms of mononucleosis include:

- ✚ swollen lymph nodes

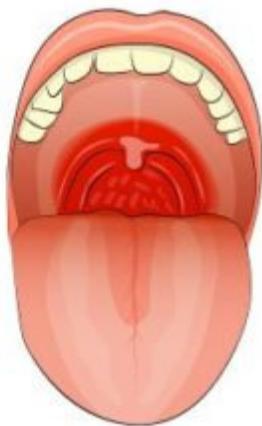


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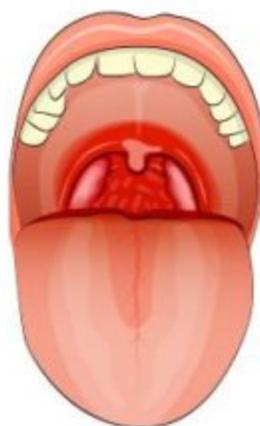
DISEASES OF THE MOUTH AND THROAT



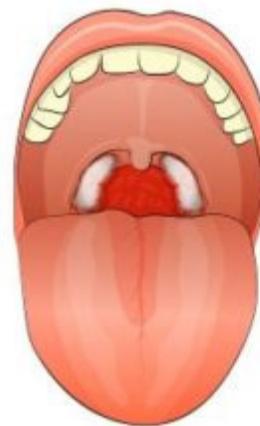
a healthy throat



laryngitis, pharyngitis



tonsillitis



diphtheria



fungus



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severe fatigue

- ✚ fever
- ✚ muscle aches
- ✚ general malaise
- ✚ loss of appetite
- ✚ rash

Strep throat, another type of pharyngitis, can also cause:

- ✚ difficulty in swallowing
- ✚ red throat with white or gray patches
- ✚ swollen lymph nodes
- ✚ fever
- ✚ chills
- ✚ loss of appetite
- ✚ nausea
- ✚ unusual taste in the mouth
- ✚ general malaise

The length of the contagious period will also depend on your underlying condition. If you have a viral infection, you will be contagious until your fever runs its course. If you have strep throat, you may be contagious from the onset until you've spent 24 hours on antibiotics.

The common cold usually lasts less than 10 days. Symptoms, including fever, may peak around three to five days. If pharyngitis is associated with a cold virus, you can expect your symptoms to last this duration of time.



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Get answers and treatment in minutes without leaving home — anytime. Consult with a U.S. board-certified doctor via high-quality video. Insurance accepted.

How is pharyngitis diagnosed?

Physical exam

If you're experiencing symptoms of pharyngitis, your doctor will look at your throat. They'll check for any white or gray patches, swelling, and redness. Your doctor may also look in your ears and nose. To check for swollen lymph nodes, they will feel the sides of your neck.

Throat culture

If your doctor suspects that you have strep throat, they will likely take a throat culture. This involves using a cotton swab to take a sample of the secretions from your throat. Most doctors are able to do a rapid strep test in the office. This test will tell your doctor within a few minutes if the test is positive for *streptococcus*. In some cases, the swab is sent to a lab for further testing and results are not available for at least 24 hours.

Blood tests

If your doctor suspects another cause of your pharyngitis, they may order blood work. A small sample of blood from your arm or hand is drawn and then sent to a lab for testing. This test can determine whether you have mononucleosis. A complete blood count (CBC) test may be done to determine if you have another type of infection.



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Symptoms



Throat irritation



Inflamed throat



Feeling unwell



Pain when swallowing

Healthy throat



Pharyngitis



Treatment



Drink more



Pain medication



Gargle salt water



Lozenges



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Home care and medication

Home care

If a virus is causing your pharyngitis, home care can help relieve symptoms. Home care includes:

- ✚ drinking plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration
- ✚ eating warm broth
- ✚ gargling with warm salt water (1 teaspoon of salt per 8 ounces of water)
- ✚ using a humidifier
- ✚ resting until you feel better

For pain and fever relief, consider taking over-the-counter medication such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil). Throat lozenges may also be helpful in soothing a painful, scratchy throat.

Alternative remedies are sometimes used to treat pharyngitis. However, you should contact your doctor before using them to avoid drug interactions or other health complications.

Some of the most commonly used herbs include:

- ✚ honeysuckle
- ✚ licorice
- ✚ marshmallow root
- ✚ sage
- ✚ slippery elm



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Medical treatment

In some cases, medical treatment is necessary for pharyngitis. This is especially the case if it's caused by a bacterial infection. For such instances, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Trusted Source (CDC), amoxicillin and penicillin are the most commonly prescribed treatments for strep throat. It's important that you take the entire course of antibiotics to prevent the infection from returning or worsening. An entire course of these antibiotics usually lasts 7 to 10 days.

Pharyngitis prevention

Maintaining proper hygiene can prevent many cases of pharyngitis.

To prevent pharyngitis:

- ✚ avoid sharing food, drinks, and eating utensils
- ✚ avoid individuals who are sick
- ✚ wash your hands often, especially before eating and after coughing or sneezing
- ✚ use alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap and water aren't available
- ✚ avoid smoking and inhaling secondhand smoke

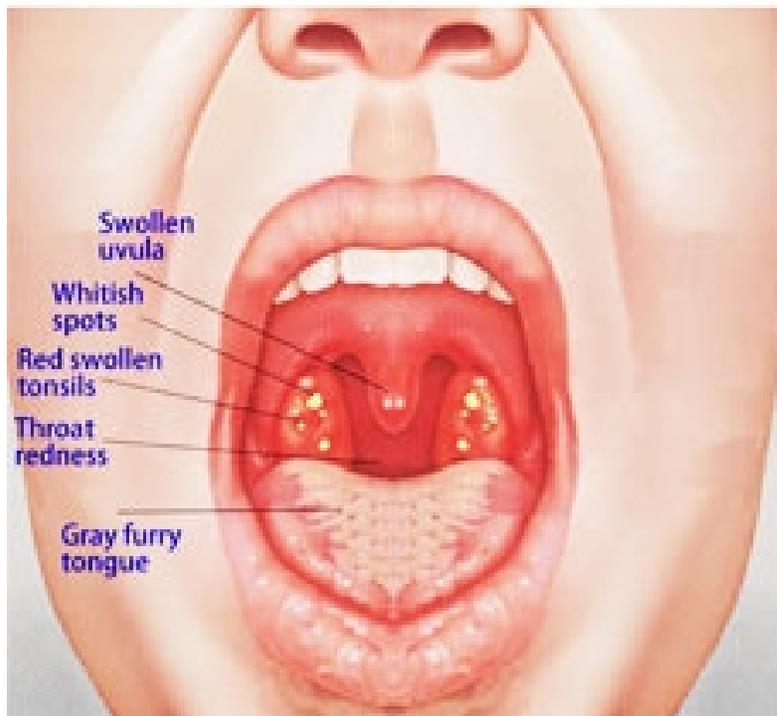
Outlook

Most cases of pharyngitis can be successfully treated at home. However, there are some symptoms that require a doctor visit for further evaluation.

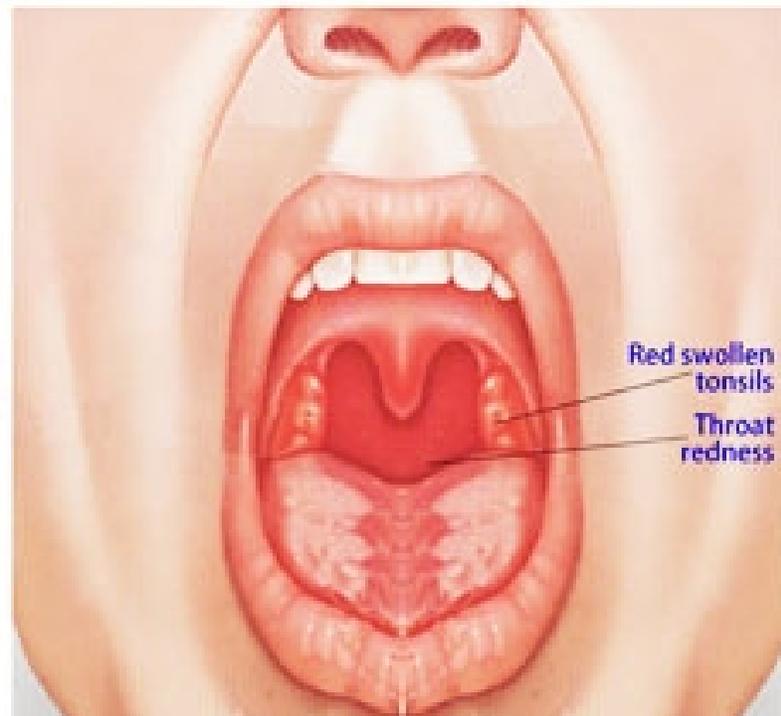
You should see your doctor if:

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Bacterial



Viral





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you have had a sore throat for more than a week

- ✚ you have a fever greater than 100.4°F
- ✚ your lymph nodes are swollen
- ✚ you develop a new rash
- ✚ your symptoms do not improve after completing your full course of antibiotics
- ✚ your symptoms return after completing your course of antibiotics

Sources: Pharyngitis (strep throat). (2016). [cdc.gov/groupastrep/diseases-hcp/strep-throat.html](https://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/diseases-hcp/strep-throat.html); Schmitt BD. (2015). Infection exposure questions. stlouischildrens.org/articles/kidcare/infection-exposure-questions; Sore throat? Know when to call the doctor. (n.d.). osteopathic.org/osteopathic-health/about-your-health/health-conditions-library/general-health/Pages/sore-throat.aspx