

Tonsillitis

Emergency Department factsheets



What is tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis is an infection of the tonsils, which are glands on either side of the back of the throat. The tonsils are part of the immune system, which protects and helps the body to fight infections.

Tonsillitis is very common and can occur at any age. It is most common in children and young adults.

What causes tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis is mostly caused by a virus and is often preceded by a cold (a runny nose, cough and sore eyes). Fewer cases (about one in seven) are caused by bacteria. The most common type of bacteria involved is streptococcus (also known as 'strep' throat).

What are the symptoms?

People with tonsillitis often have:

- a sore throat and neck
- pain when they swallow
- fever (a body temperature which is over 37.5°C for adults and over 38°C in children)
- a loss of appetite, and feel generally 'unwell'
- red and swollen tonsils (with pus)
- swollen and tender lymph nodes (glands) at either side of the neck
- a change in the sound of their voice (such as sounding 'hoarse').

Children may complain of tummy pain without having a sore throat, and they may vomit. Young children may just have a fever.

Treatment

Your treatment will depend on whether you have a bacterial or a viral infection. Simply looking at

the tonsils does not always reveal the cause (bacteria or virus).

A throat swab (sterile cotton wool on a stick that is gently rubbed over the tonsils) may be taken to test for bacteria. If bacteria are present, then antibiotics are prescribed to help recovery. If you are given antibiotics, you must finish all the medicine, even if you feel better after a couple of days.

If the cause is a virus antibiotics will not help. A blood test may be needed to find the type of virus, especially if the infection does not clear up in about two weeks.

Home care

Some general measures may help you recover.

- Take paracetamol (such as Panadol or Dymadon) for pain. If you are looking after a sick child, carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing paracetamol (such as some cough medicines and cold and flu preparations).
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat soft, cool foods (such as jelly and ice cream). Do not worry if your child stops eating for a day or two. They will eat when they are feeling better. Offer your child fluids, little and often (such as water or diluted juice). Chicken soup and other soft, easy to eat foods may be beneficial.
- Gargle with warm salt water to relieve a sore throat. Make sure to spit the salt water out afterwards. Adults can use soluble aspirin to gargle. Never give aspirin to a child.
- Throat sprays and lozenges (such as Difflam or Strepsils) may help and are available from pharmacies. Ask your pharmacist for more information.

What to expect

- Many people improve in the first day or two. Nine out of ten people will be better in a week.
- A collection of pus around one tonsil (called a quinsy) may form in some people. This causes severe pain on one side of the throat and can make it difficult to swallow and even breathe. Antibiotics can help, but minor surgery may be needed to drain the pus.
- Make sure that any course of antibiotics is finished. If the full course is not taken, this can lead to further problems.
- In children under the age of seven, the tonsils are normally large and defences against infection are not fully developed.
- This means some young children can have repeated attacks of tonsillitis.
- The attacks will become less frequent as the child grows older.
- Most doctors are reluctant to advise surgery to remove tonsils (a tonsillectomy). Surgery is only recommended if a child has many attacks in a year or has problems breathing because of large tonsils.

Prevention

Unfortunately this is hard to do. Colds easily spread from person to person from coughs, sneezes, and infected fluids from the nose and throat. People can pass on viruses when they first show signs of being sick until five days after the illness starts.

There is no immunisation to prevent tonsillitis. You can try to avoid the infection spreading by:

- keeping yourself or your child away from others while unwell (if bacteria caused the tonsillitis, it will be safe to be around others after about 24 hours on antibiotics)
- washing your hands often (help children to do the same)
- keeping the sick person's eating and drinking utensils separate from others

- not sharing toothbrushes
- not kissing a person with tonsillitis, or kissing someone if you have tonsillitis yourself.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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