Indiana State Department of Health
Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About…Strep Throat and Scarlet Fever

What is strep throat?

Strep throat is caused by group A Streptococcus (GAS) bacteria and is a mild illness with symptoms of fever, a sore throat with pus spots and swollen lymph nodes. Cases of strep throat may also have symptoms of sinus or ear infections. Rarely, complications such as scarlet fever, rheumatic fever and kidney problems can occur following a case of strep throat.

What are the symptoms of strep throat?

The most common symptom of strep throat is a red and painful sore throat. Other symptoms include:

- Fever
- Difficulty swallowing
- Red and enlarged tonsils
- White patches in the throat or on the tonsils
- Tender or swollen glands in the neck
- Loss of appetite and nausea

Scarlet fever is the most common condition associated with strep throat. Symptoms include a sunburn-like rash that feels like sandpaper, a high fever and a strawberry-like appearance of the tongue.

How is strep throat spread?

Strep throat is spread through direct contact with an infected person's nose and mouth secretions or through air when an infected person sneezes or coughs. The bacteria can also spread by touching contaminated objects and surfaces, although this is rare. An individual with strep throat should remain at home from school or work until antibiotics have been taken for 24 hours.

Who is at risk for strep throat?

School-aged children and teenagers are at the greatest risk for strep throat as infection occurs most often during the school year when children are in large groups together.

How do I know if I have strep throat?

A health care provider can perform a rapid strep test during an office visit by taking a cotton swab and collecting a sample of fluids from the back of the throat. If the rapid test returns as negative, your healthcare provider may also collect another specimen to see if the GAS bacteria are present or if some other bacteria may be causing the illness.

How is strep throat treated?

Most sore throats are caused by viruses and not streptococcal bacteria and do not need medical treatment. Strep throat can be treated with many different types of antibiotics. Antibiotic therapy will reduce the length and severity of symptoms and reduce the risk of complications. A 24-hour course of antibiotic therapy will reduce a person's chance of spreading the bacteria and help improve symptoms. It is important to take the full course of therapy usually for 1-2 weeks to eliminate the infection.

How is strep throat prevented?

Good personal hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of strep throat, including good handwashing and prompt disposal of used facial tissues. It is important to wash hands regularly, especially after coughing or sneezing, and before and after caring for a sick person. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water is not available. Avoid close personal contact (i.e. hugging, kissing, etc.) with infected persons. Routine disinfection of contaminated surfaces, particularly in child care or school settings will reduce possible sources of infection.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website:
http://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/type-infections.html

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