Dear Alice,

What is strep throat and what can I do to get better?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Strep throat can be a real pain in the neck, err, throat, and the streptococcus bacteria is to blame. Streptococcus has hundreds of different strains that are organized into group A and group B. Group A strep (GAS), or streptococcus pyogenes, causes strep throat, as well as scarlet fever [2] and impetigo [3]. Group B strep (GBS), or streptococcus agalactiae, causes blood infections, pneumonia, and meningitis. GBS especially affects newborns and their mothers, though serious GBS infections occur in other age groups in both men and women. GAS and GBS infections can range from mild to severe, and potentially become fatal if not treated appropriately.

Symptoms of strep throat include:

- Severe sore or itchy throat, often with white patches on the tonsils
- Fever
- Swollen lymph nodes in the neck
- Headache
- Difficulty swallowing
- Nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain (common in children with the illness)

Strep throat is very contagious, so you might want to warn people you spend time with (e.g., roommates, friends, family, and coworkers) if you’ve recently received a positive diagnosis. If you’re vigilant about handwashing [4] and covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze, you'll reduce the risk of someone jumping down your throat for getting her/him sick. Strep throat is spread through contact with mucus from the nose or throat of an infected individual is sprayed into the air through a cough or a sneeze and someone else breathes in the infected droplets. It’s also possible to spread strep throat through shared personal items, food, or drinks, when the same secretions from an infected individual end up in the mouth or nose of others.

Untreated strep may lead to more serious illnesses and infections such as kidney inflammation, scarlet fever, and rheumatic fever (which causes joint and heart inflammation).
As such, it’s vital to have strep throat diagnosed and properly treated. A health care provider can diagnose strep throat after taking a throat culture with a swab. If the test comes back positive, the most common treatment is antibiotics—usually penicillin (taken orally for ten days or as a one-time intramuscular injection), though other antibiotics can be used, too. While you will no longer be contagious between one and three days after treatment begins, symptoms usually subside after about four days.

To avoid any complications, the full course of prescribed medication needs to be completed. While on meds, you can help relieve your symptoms by drinking lots of fluids, getting plenty of rest, and taking over-the-counter (OTC) pain reliever medications such as ibuprofen. Other things that could help you feel more comfortable include using a humidifier, eating soft foods (e.g., soups, applesauce, oatmeal, yogurt, scrambled eggs), and gargling 1/4 teaspoon of table salt mixed with eight ounces of warm water every few hours.

Feel better and hope your throat clears up soon!

Alice!

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