

BACKGROUND

Streptococcal pharyngitis (known as strep throat) is an infection caused by bacteria called Group A *Streptococcus* (sometimes just called “strep”). The infection is usually mild, but serious complications can occur. There are several million cases of strep throat each year and it is more common in the winter and spring months.

WHO DOES THE ISSUE IMPACT?

Anyone can get strep throat, but it is most common in school-aged children. Parents of school-aged children and adults who are in contact with children often have a higher risk for strep throat than adults who are not around children often. The most common way strep throat can spread is through close contact with someone who has the infection. Crowded conditions, such as schools and child care centers, can increase the risk of getting strep throat.

COMPLICATIONS

Complications can occur after a strep throat infection. This can happen if the bacteria spread to other parts of the body. Complications can include abscesses (pockets of pus) around the tonsils, swollen lymph nodes in the neck, and sinus or ear infections. Other complications can affect the heart (rheumatic fever) or kidneys.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

In general, strep throat is a mild infection, but it can be very painful. Symptoms of strep throat usually include:

- Sore throat that can start very quickly;
- Pain when swallowing;
- Fever;
- Red and swollen tonsils, sometimes with white patches or streaks of pus;
- Tiny, red spots (petechiae) on the roof of the mouth;
- Swollen lymph nodes in the front of the neck; and/or
- A red rash all over the body that feels like sandpaper. Sometimes people with GAS develop this symptom. When this occurs, the illness is called “scarlet fever.”

CAUSES AND TRANSMISSION

Group A strep live in the nose and throat and can easily spread to other people. When someone who is infected coughs or sneezes, the bacteria travel in small droplets of water. You can get sick if you breathe in those droplets or if you touch something that has the droplets on it and then touch your mouth or nose. You could also become ill if you drink from the same glass or eat from the same plate as a sick person. Individuals who carry the bacteria but have no symptoms (“carriers”) are less contagious but can still spread bacteria. People with strep throat can spread the bacteria to others until 24 hours after antibiotic treatment or for 10 to

21 days if not treated. Rarely, people get strep throat from eating contaminated food or milk. Pets or household items, like toys, are not known to spread these bacteria.

TESTS AND DIAGNOSIS

Strep throat is diagnosed by a laboratory test (throat culture) that confirms that the bacteria are present in the throat. This test can take 24 to 48 hours to get results. Your doctor's office can also perform a rapid test that can identify strep throat quickly.

TREATMENTS

Strep throat can be treated with inexpensive antibiotics, like penicillin. Early treatment may reduce the risk of complications from the bacteria. It is very important to complete the entire course of antibiotics as prescribed. If you are diagnosed with strep throat, you should stay home from work, school, or daycare until you no longer have a fever and have taken antibiotics for at least 24 hours.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can prevent the spread of strep throat by:

- Cleaning your hands often, including before eating or preparing food, before touching your eyes, nose or mouth, after using the restroom and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing;
- Washing hands with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub;
- Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze;
- Coughing or sneezing into your upper sleeve or elbow, not your hands, if you don't have a tissue; and
- Washing glasses, utensils, and plates after someone who is sick uses them. After they have been washed, these items are safe for others to use.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

CDC Group A Streptococcal Disease: <http://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/index.html>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information.

If you have any questions, contact us at 1-877-PA-HEALTH