



# Patient education: Strep throat in children (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

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## What is strep throat?

Strep throat is an infection that is caused by bacteria and leads to a sore throat. However, most sore throats are caused by a virus, and are not strep throat.

About 3 out of every 10 children with a sore throat actually have strep throat. It is most common in school-age children.

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## How can I tell if my child has strep throat?

It is hard to tell the difference between strep throat and a sore throat caused by a virus. But there are some clues you can look for.

People who have strep throat often have:

- Severe throat pain
- Fever (temperature higher than 100.4°F or 38°C)
- Swollen glands in the neck

You might also be able to see redness on the roof of your child's mouth, or white patches in the back of the throat ( [figure 1](#)).

Children older than 5 who have strep throat **do not** usually have a cough, runny nose, or itchy or red eyes. Strep throat is uncommon in very young children, but if they do get it, it can cause a runny or stuffy nose, plus a slight fever. Babies with strep throat might act fussy and not want to eat.

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## Is there a test for strep throat?

Yes. If you think your child might have strep throat, a doctor or nurse can check for it easily. He or she can run a swab (Q-Tip) along the back of your child's throat, and test it for the bacteria that cause strep throat.

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## Does my child need antibiotics?

If a test shows that your child has strep throat, then yes, he or she needs antibiotics. Most people with strep throat get better without antibiotics, but doctors and nurses often prescribe them anyway. That's because antibiotics can prevent problems that strep throat can sometimes cause. Plus, antibiotics can reduce the symptoms of strep throat and keep it from spreading to other people.

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## What can I do to help my child feel better?

Make sure that your child takes his or her antibiotics as directed. There are also other ways to help relieve symptoms:

- **Soothing foods and drinks** – Give your child things that are easy to swallow, like tea or soup, or popsicles to suck on. Your child might not feel like eating or drinking, but it's important that he or she gets enough liquids. Offer different warm and cold drinks for your child to try.
- **Medicines** – [Acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol) or [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) can help with throat pain. The right dose depends on your child's weight, so ask your child's doctor how much to give.

Do not give [aspirin](#) or medicines that contain aspirin to children younger than 18 years. In children, aspirin can cause a serious problem called Reye syndrome. Do not give children throat sprays or cough drops, either. Throat sprays and cough drops contain medicine, but they are no better at relieving throat pain than hard candies. Plus, throat sprays can cause an allergic reaction.

- **Other treatments** – For children who are older than 4 to 5 years, sucking on hard candies or a lollipop might help. For children older than 6 to 8 years, gargling with salt water might help.
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## When can my child go back to school?

Your child should be on antibiotics before going back to school. This is to avoid spreading the infection to others. If your child starts taking antibiotics by 5:00 PM, he or she will probably no longer be contagious by the next morning. If your child is feeling better and no longer has a fever, the doctor might say that he or she can return to school that day.

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## How can I keep my child from getting strep throat again?

Wash your child's hands often with soap and water. It is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of infection. You can use an alcohol rub instead, but make sure the hand rub gets everywhere on your child's hands.

Try to teach your child about other ways to avoid spreading germs, such as not touching his or her face after being around a sick person.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Sore throat in children \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Sore throat in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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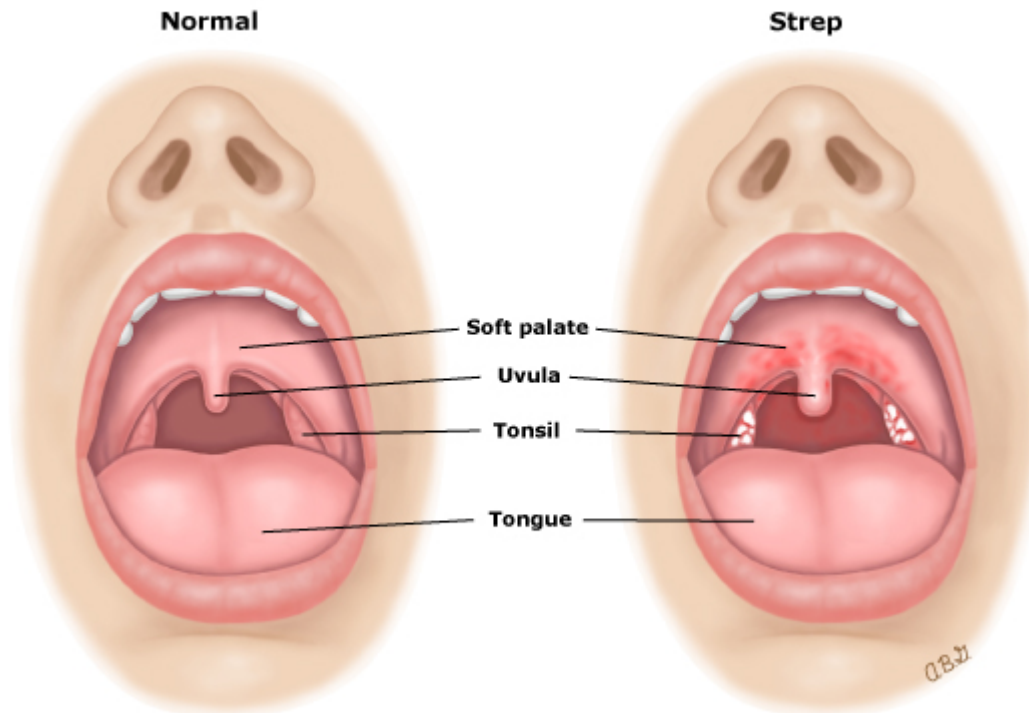
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## GRAPHICS

### Strep throat

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Strep throat can make the roof of your mouth turn red and your tonsils white. It can also make your uvula swell.

Graphic 78761 Version 6.0

