

SORE THROATS & SELF CARE

A sore throat is one of the most common student health concerns. There are many reasons that sore throats are so common on campus:

- Sore throats are very prevalent among young adults.
- Many students are new to the area and each other, and thus are more susceptible to each other's viruses.
- Most students experience major changes in lifestyle, diet, sleep pattern, exercise pattern and stress level, all of which can greatly affect the body's ability to fight off illness.

What are the common causes of sore throats?

- **Viruses** cause 90% of all sore throats. There are an estimated 200-300 different strains of viruses which can cause colds and/or sore throats. Your body develops immunity to each virus as it comes along, but if the next one is slightly different, you may get another cold/sore throat.

Antibiotics do not kill viruses. For many years, antibiotics were prescribed, but research has shown that the course of the viral illness or sore throat was not shortened. Antibiotics can have serious side effects and are now used only when there is clear evidence of a bacterial infection that would respond to such treatment.

- **Allergies** may cause post-nasal drip that irritates the throat to the point of soreness. The sore throat caused by post-nasal drip tends to be worse at night and in the morning when you first awaken, but is less sore during the day.
- **Bacteria (esp. Group A Beta Streptococcus)** causes what is generally known as **strep throat**. This is what most students worry about when they have a sore throat, but in fact, strep is an uncommon cause of sore throats. Strep throat tends to cause pain that starts out gradually and builds up quickly to moderate-severe pain. It may become difficult to swallow. The pain is constant, throughout the day. You may also feel extremely tired and have headaches, muscle aches and occasional episodes of nausea and vomiting. You may notice bad breath odor. It is common to have a fever of 100+ degrees for the course of the illness. The fever tends to worsen at night.

If you look at your throat, you will notice that it is red and swollen. The tonsils are usually bright red, with white, pus-like spots or patches. The lymph glands in your neck will be pea-size or larger, and tender to gentle pressure. If you notice signs of strep throat, make an appointment to be seen in Counseling, Health and Wellness Services (879-1555).

What can I do to help myself feel better?

Regardless of the cause of the sore throat, there are several things you can do which may help:

- **Increase your intake of fluids.** During an illness, you need 8-10 big glasses of water or fruit juice daily.
- **Increase your sleep.** Try to squeeze in 1-2 extra hours of sleep daily for several days. Sleep time is when your body does its best healing.
- **Use salt water gargle mix** (1/2 teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm water. Gargle with it several times a day. This keeps your throat clean and moist and decreases swelling and irritation.
- **Increase the humidity in your sleeping area.** Get a cool-mist humidifier and run it at night. This keeps your throat moist. You may borrow a humidifier from CHWS.

If you have a viral illness, the focus is on symptom relief and immune system strengthening to help you get better faster. Some suggestions for symptom relief include:

- **Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) – as directed for general body aches, discomfort, sore throat and fever**
- **Acetaminophen (Tylenol) – as directed for general body aches, discomfort, sore throat and fever**
- **Lozenges with benzocaine (anesthetic) – helps numb the throat**
- **Zinc – may help your throat & fight infection, but not fully proven**
- **Avoid aspirin and aspirin-containing products**

How do I do a self-care throat examination?

1. Check your temperature. If you don't know how, get a copy of our handout on taking your temperature.
2. Take a penlight or flashlight and stand in front of a mirror. Shine the light down your throat, while looking in the mirror. Identify the various structures. It helps to do this when your throat is well so you know what normal looks like.
3. Look at the uvula (hangs down in the center of the back of the throat). Is it red or swollen?
4. Look at the tonsils (soft-looking bumps on the sides of the back of the throat on either side of the base of the tongue). Are they enlarged? Red or swollen? Do they have white or pus patches?
5. Feel your neck under the corner of the jaw, under the ears, and along the sides of the windpipe (trachea). If you feel bumps or tenderness when you press, this means you have enlarged lymph glands. The neck lymph glands may become enlarged when the immune system is fighting any infection in the throat or head.

It doesn't look like I have strep throat. Now What?

At this point, we simply recommend that you give it time. Follow the instructions above to increase your body's ability to fight off the infection. You can check your temperature daily and look at your throat with the light. Expect it to take 7-10 days to resolve, longer if you fall into the category of stressed-out college student existing on 3 hours sleep and diet Pepsi! If at any time your sore throat starts to look like strep, make an appointment to be seen.

If you have questions or concerns, please let us know. Call Counseling, Health and Wellness Services at 879-1555