



# Tonsillitis

## What is tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis is inflammation of the tonsils, two oval-shaped pads of tissue at the back of the throat — one tonsil on each side. Signs and symptoms of tonsillitis include swollen tonsils, sore throat, difficulty swallowing and tender lymph nodes on the sides of the neck.

Tonsillitis most commonly affects children between preschool ages and the mid-teenage years.

## Why do tonsils get infected?

The tonsils are the immune system's first line of defense against bacteria and viruses that enter your mouth. This function may make the tonsils particularly vulnerable to infection and inflammation. However, the tonsil's immune system function declines after puberty — a factor that may account for the rare cases of tonsillitis in adults.

## How is it spread?

Most cases of tonsillitis are caused by infection with a common virus, but bacterial infections also may cause tonsillitis. If you drink from the same glass or eat from the same plate as the sick person, you could also become ill.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

Common signs and symptoms of tonsillitis include:

- Red, swollen tonsils
- White or yellow coating or patches on the tonsils
- Sore throat
- Difficult or painful swallowing
- Fever
- Enlarged, tender glands (lymph nodes) in the neck

- A scratchy, muffled or throaty voice
- Bad breath
- Stomachache, particularly in younger children
- Stiff neck
- Headache

In young children who are unable to describe how they feel signs of tonsillitis may include:

- Drooling due to difficult or painful swallowing
- Refusal to eat
- Unusual fussiness

## Should a person with tonsillitis be isolated?

Exclude from work/school until fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.

## What type of treatment and care should be given?

If a virus is the expected cause of tonsillitis, at-home strategies are the only treatment. Your doctor won't prescribe antibiotics. At-home strategies include: rest, adequate fluids, saltwater gargle, lozenges, treatment of pain and fever.

If tonsillitis is caused by a bacterial infection, your doctor will prescribe a course of antibiotics. Penicillin taken by mouth for 10 days is the most common antibiotic treatment prescribed for tonsillitis caused by group A streptococcus. If you are allergic to penicillin, your doctor will prescribe an alternative antibiotic.

You must take the full course of antibiotics as prescribed even if the symptoms go away completely. Failure to take all of the medication as directed may result in the infection worsening or spreading to other parts of the body.

## Should the tonsils be removed?

Surgery to remove tonsils (tonsillectomy) may be used to treat frequently recurring tonsillitis, chronic tonsillitis or bacterial tonsillitis that doesn't respond to antibiotic treatment. Frequent tonsillitis is generally defined as:

- More than seven episodes in one year
- More than five episodes a year in each of the preceding two years
- More than three episodes a year in each of the preceding three years

Adapted from:

“Tonsillitis.” Mayo Clinic, 2010

(<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/tonsillitis>, accessed 6 May 2014 ).