

## Patient information from the BMJ Group

# Tonsillitis

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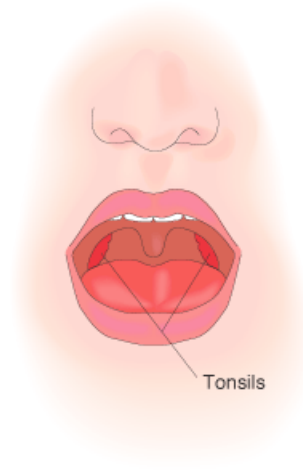
## Tonsillitis

Tonsillitis can make you very ill and keep you in bed for a few days with a high temperature and a severe sore throat. It will get better, but if you or your child gets repeated bouts of tonsillitis, an operation to take out the tonsils may be needed.

We've brought together the best research about tonsillitis and weighed up the evidence about how to treat it. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

## What is tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis is an infection in your tonsils. Your tonsils are two small, almond-shaped mounds that sit on either side of the back of your throat. If they get infected with a virus or bacteria, it can make you ill. You may need to take a few days off school or work.



Your tonsils sit at the back of your throat.

Your tonsils are part of your body's **immune system**. Your immune system fights infections and helps you stay healthy. Your tonsils help protect the rest of your body from **bacteria** and **viruses** that get into your mouth. But sometimes, viruses or bacteria attack the tonsils themselves. This can make them swollen and **inflamed**. This is when you get the painful symptoms of tonsillitis.

You may also get the infection in other parts of your throat.

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Lots of different bacteria and viruses can cause tonsillitis. You can pick them up easily from other people who are ill. For example, you may breathe in droplets in the air that contain viruses or bacteria.

The bacteria that most commonly cause tonsillitis are called *Streptococcus*.<sup>[1]</sup> These bacteria can also cause a [sore throat](#) without affecting your tonsils. You may hear a sore throat or tonsillitis called **strep throat**.

You won't be able to tell what's caused your tonsillitis. The symptoms are the same whether it's caused by bacteria or a virus.<sup>[2]</sup>

If you have one attack of tonsillitis, doctors call it **acute tonsillitis**. But if you get tonsillitis a lot, your doctor may say you have **recurrent tonsillitis**. This is a severe form of tonsillitis. It usually means you have five or more episodes a year and your symptoms are bad enough to stop you doing your normal activities.<sup>[2]</sup>

Tonsillitis affects children more often than adults.<sup>[3]</sup> Girls may get recurrent tonsillitis more than boys.<sup>[4]</sup>

### What are the symptoms of tonsillitis?

You may not be able to tell whether you have a sore throat or tonsillitis. The symptoms are very similar.

Here are the symptoms you may get if you have tonsillitis:<sup>[2]</sup>

- A very sore throat that lasts more than three days
- Pain when you swallow
- A high temperature
- A headache
- Red and swollen tonsils
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty carrying on with your normal routine
- Patches of white pus on your tonsils
- Lumps under your jaw and in your neck (these are swollen glands).

If you have a severe infection, you may be so ill that you need to stay in bed.<sup>[2]</sup>

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Children under 5 don't often say they have a sore throat, because they don't know where the pain is coming from. They may say they have a tummy ache. <sup>[3]</sup>

If your symptoms are very bad or last longer than three days, you should see your doctor. <sup>[3]</sup> He or she will want to look at your mouth and throat. If your tonsils look inflamed, it's possible to take a swab from your tonsils to find out if **bacteria** are causing the infection. But your doctor won't normally do this, because these tests aren't always accurate. <sup>[2]</sup> You should also see your doctor if your sore throats are frequent.

Some doctors call all throat infections a sore throat, whether or not the tonsils are infected. <sup>[2]</sup>

### How common is tonsillitis?

Sore throats are very common. It's hard to say how common tonsillitis is. This is because it's difficult to tell the difference between an ordinary sore throat and tonsillitis.

Each year, about 1 in 10 people go to see their doctor because of repeated sore throats. <sup>[5]</sup> And more than 1 in 10 people have repeated bouts of tonsillitis at some point in their life. <sup>[6]</sup> This is the severe form of tonsillitis (recurrent tonsillitis), when you get at least five bouts of the illness in a year.

Each year in the UK, about 50,000 people have their tonsils out. Just over half of these operations are for children under 15. <sup>[7]</sup>

### What treatments work for tonsillitis?

You won't usually need any treatment for tonsillitis. Your body will fight off the infection. Resting, drinking plenty of fluids, and taking painkillers may help you feel better while this happens.

If you get repeated attacks of tonsillitis, you may want to think about having your tonsils removed.

- Taking painkillers such as paracetamol, aspirin, or ibuprofen should help you feel better. But **don't give aspirin to children under 16**.
- Doctors sometimes prescribe **antibiotics** for tonsillitis if the infection is caused by **bacteria**. But antibiotics have side effects.
- Antibiotics don't work against **viruses**, which are a common cause of tonsillitis.
- Children who have their tonsils taken out may get fewer throat infections in the short term. But children often get fewer throat infections as they get older, whether they have surgery or not.

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- There haven't been many good studies on whether adults benefit from having their tonsils out.

Which treatments work best? We've looked at the best research and given a rating for each treatment according to how well it works.

## Treatment Group 1

### Treatments for tonsillitis

#### Treatments that work, but whose harms may outweigh benefits

- [Antibiotics](#)
- [Tonsillectomy \(operation to remove tonsils\)](#)

### What will happen to me?

Tonsillitis usually clears up on its own. But if your symptoms are very bad, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics.

There hasn't been much research on what happens to people who get repeated bouts of tonsillitis (recurrent tonsillitis). Some studies have found that children who get repeated bouts of tonsillitis go on to get fewer infections over time, even if they don't have surgery. <sup>[8]</sup> <sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[10]</sup> <sup>[11]</sup> But we don't know whether this is true for adults who get repeated attacks of tonsillitis.

There are more serious problems that you can get after having tonsillitis, although we don't know exactly how often these happen. They are probably very rare.

- Sometimes an **abscess** forms behind your tonsil, which pushes the tonsil further out into your throat. Another name for this is **quinsy**. It can cause a bad sore throat, usually on one side of the throat. And you may have difficulty opening your mouth. If you get these symptoms, you should see your doctor.
- If your tonsillitis is caused by infection with a particular type of *Streptococcus* bacteria, you can get **rheumatic fever**. This causes pain and swelling in your joints, a high temperature, and pain in your tummy. This disease used to be quite common. But it doesn't happen much now. <sup>[12]</sup>

Having lots of attacks of severe tonsillitis can make your life difficult. <sup>[13]</sup> You may need time off work, or your child could lose time at school. You may wish to consider surgery to remove your tonsils. To read more, see [What treatments work for tonsillitis?](#) However, most people who get tonsillitis don't need surgery.

## Treatments:

### Antibiotics

In this section

Doctors don't always give antibiotics for throat infections. But if your symptoms are severe, your doctor may prescribe them. <sup>[2]</sup>

Antibiotics are drugs that kill bacteria. They don't work against viruses, which are another cause of tonsillitis. There are lots of different antibiotics. Amoxicillin and erythromycin are two types of antibiotics that doctors use a lot.

Studies of people with a sore throat have found that antibiotics can reduce how long you have symptoms, but only by about a day. <sup>[14]</sup>

Antibiotics can reduce the risk of complications, such as rheumatic fever or an abscess on the tonsils (quinsy). <sup>[14]</sup> But these problems are very rare anyway.

You may be given antibiotics if your tonsillitis gets worse over time or if you have a high temperature for a long time.

Antibiotics can have side effects, although these are usually mild. You may get an upset stomach, diarrhoea, or a rash. <sup>[15]</sup>

Most doctors are careful not to prescribe antibiotics unless they think you really need them. This is because antibiotics may not work as well in the future if they are used too much. Bacteria can become **resistant** to antibiotics.

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### Tonsillectomy (operation to remove tonsils)

In this section

If you or your child get tonsillitis a lot, you may want to think about having your tonsils taken out. You usually need to have at least five attacks of tonsillitis a year for doctors to recommend an operation. <sup>[2] [16] [17] [18]</sup> But even then your doctor may advise you to wait six months before you decide whether to have surgery, to see if you stop getting so many sore throats. <sup>[16]</sup>

There are several ways of removing the tonsils. Traditional surgery uses a metal blade, such as surgical scissors. A more modern technique uses heat to remove the tonsils. This is called **diathermy**. Doctors can also use laser surgery or a scalpel that vibrates, although these techniques are less common. <sup>[19] [20]</sup> People usually have a **general anaesthetic**, so they will be asleep during the operation.

Whether you decide to have surgery will depend on how badly tonsillitis affects your life. We've prepared some extra information for people thinking of having an operation to take out their tonsils. To read more, see Tonsillectomy.

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Without tonsils, you (or your child) will no longer get tonsillitis. But you could still get a sore throat from an infection in other parts of your throat.

If your child has his or her tonsils out, he or she may get fewer throat infections **in the short term**. Two reviews of lots of studies found that, in the first two years after surgery, most children have fewer throat infections. They have an average of two to three fewer infections than children who take antibiotics instead of having an operation. <sup>[21]</sup> <sup>[22]</sup>

Another big review found that children who are most severely affected by tonsillitis benefit most. These children were likely to have three fewer throat infections during the year after surgery than they would have if they'd not had their tonsils out, including one fewer severe infection. <sup>[23]</sup>

But one study found that after two years, there's no real difference in the number of throat infections whether children have their tonsils out or take antibiotics instead. <sup>[8]</sup> This may be because children who don't have surgery tend to grow out of throat infections anyway.

We don't know what happens to adults who have surgery to remove their tonsils. There isn't enough research to tell us. One small study found that five to six months after having surgery, adults had fewer throat infections, lasting for fewer days, than those who were waiting to have their tonsils out. But the study didn't look at the long-term effects of having your tonsils removed. <sup>[24]</sup>

It's not clear whether having surgery works better in the long term than just taking antibiotics to treat each episode of severe tonsillitis. <sup>[25]</sup>

**Surgery has some risks.** You should discuss these with your doctor. There's a chance you could bleed heavily during your operation or afterwards. <sup>[26]</sup> <sup>[27]</sup> You may even need another operation to stop the bleeding.

Research has found that surgery using a metal blade is more likely to cause severe bleeding during surgery or soon afterwards. <sup>[26]</sup> But with surgery using heat, there's a higher risk of getting severe bleeding in the following days. Whichever technique the surgeon uses, the risk of bad bleeding is fairly low. Less than 1 in 100 people need more surgery because of bleeding in the day after their operation. The risk of needing more surgery to treat bleeding in the following days is also less than 1 in 100.

There's also a chance your teeth could get damaged during the operation, or you could get a chest infection. <sup>[28]</sup>

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## Further informations:

### Glossary:

#### immune system

Your immune system is made up of the parts of your body that fight infection. When bacteria or viruses get into your body, it's your immune system that kills them. Antibodies and white blood cells are part of your immune system. They travel in your blood and attack bacteria, viruses and other things that could damage your body.

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## **bacteria**

Bacteria are tiny organisms. There are lots of different types. Some are harmful and can cause disease. But some bacteria live in your body without causing any harm.

## **viruses**

Viruses are microbes (tiny organisms) that need the cells of humans or other animals to exist. They use the machinery of cells to reproduce. Then they spread to other cells in the body.

## **inflammation**

Inflammation is when your skin or some other part of your body becomes red, swollen, hot, and sore. Inflammation happens because your body is trying to protect you from germs, from something that's in your body and could harm you (like a splinter) or from things that cause allergies (these things are called allergens). Inflammation is one of the ways in which your body heals an infection or an injury.

## **antibiotics**

These medicines are used to help your immune system fight infection. There are a number of different types of antibiotics that work in different ways to get rid of bacteria, parasites, and other infectious agents. Antibiotics do not work against viruses.

## **general anaesthetic**

You may have a type of medicine called a general anaesthetic when you have surgery. It is given to make you unconscious so you don't feel pain when you have surgery.

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