

Is it sore throat or strep throat?

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A sore throat is a common symptom of an upper respiratory infection such as a cold or flu. It's also a symptom of a bacterial infection commonly referred to as strep throat. How can you tell if your child's sore throat is caused by a viral or bacterial infection? Mayo Clinic family medicine specialist Dr. Tina Ardon helps make the distinction.

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Your child complains of an itchy [sore throat](#) that hurts when he or she swallows. Most often, it's a viral infection that will go away on its own. You can treat the symptoms, but there is no cure for a cold or flu virus.

"Antibiotics simply won't work for a viral infection," says Ardon.

If your child complains of throat pain without coughing, it may be a sign of a different upper respiratory illness.

"Strep throat or strep pharyngitis, the medical term for that, is a specific bacterial infection that can happen in the back of the throat."

Telltale signs include tiny red spots on at the back of the roof of the mouth, or red and swollen tonsils—sometimes with white patches.

"Typically, if it's [strep throat](#), you're only going to have symptoms related to the back of the throat: fever, maybe a headache and then the sore throat," says Ardon.

Your [health care provider](#) can perform lab tests to confirm if it's strep throat and offer antibiotics to treat the bacterial infection.

"If a child has other symptoms, such as a [runny nose](#), sneezing, coughing, it's highly unlikely we're dealing with strep throat."

Plenty of rest and warm, soothing liquids will help. And make sure your child has been immunized with a flu vaccine.

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