

Tonsillitis

Tonsillitis is a common childhood illness, but teenagers and adults can get it, too. It usually goes away on its own after a few days.

Check if you have tonsillitis

Tonsillitis can feel like a bad cold or flu. The tonsils at the back of your throat will be red and swollen.

The main symptoms in children and adults are:

- a sore throat
- difficulty swallowing
- hoarse or no voice
- a high temperature of 38C or above
- coughing
- a headache
- feeling sick
- earache
- feeling tired

Sometimes the symptoms can be more severe and include:

- swollen, painful glands in your neck (feels like a lump on the side of your neck)
- white pus-filled spots on your tonsils at the back of your throat
- bad breath

What tonsils with pus-filled spots can look like

If you're not sure it's tonsillitis

Look at other [sore throat symptoms](#).

How long tonsillitis lasts

Symptoms will usually go away after 3 to 4 days.

Tonsillitis is not contagious, but the infections that cause it are (for example, colds and flu).

To stop these infections spreading:

- stay off work or keep your child at home until you or your child feel better
- use tissues when you cough or sneeze and throw them away after
- wash your hands after coughing or sneezing

How to treat tonsillitis yourself

Tonsillitis usually has to run its course.

To help ease the symptoms:

- get plenty of rest
- drink cool drinks to soothe the throat
- take [paracetamol](#) or [ibuprofen](#) (do not give aspirin to children under 16)
- gargle with warm salty water (children should not try this)

How to gargle with salty water

A pharmacist can help with tonsillitis

Speak to a pharmacist about tonsillitis.

They can give advice and suggest treatments to ease a sore throat, like:

- lozenges
- throat sprays
- antiseptic solutions

Find a pharmacy

Non-urgent advice: See a GP if:

- you have white pus-filled spots on the tonsils at the back of your throat
- the sore throat is so painful it's difficult to eat or drink
- the symptoms do not go away after 4 days

Information:

Coronavirus update: how to contact a GP

It's still important to get help from a GP if you need it. To contact your GP surgery:

- visit their website
- use the [NHS App](#)
- call them

[Find out about using the NHS during coronavirus](#)

What happens at your appointment

Your doctor can usually tell its tonsillitis by asking about your symptoms and looking at the back of your throat.

Sometimes they might:

- wipe a cotton bud at the back of your throat to test for bacteria
- organise a blood test to rule out [glandular fever](#) (if your symptoms are severe or will not go away)

Usually you'll get any test results back within a couple of days.

Treatment from a GP

Treatment will depend on what caused your tonsillitis:

- a virus (viral tonsillitis), which most children and adults have – this type has to run its course and antibiotics will not help
- bacteria (bacterial tonsillitis) – your GP may prescribe antibiotics

Usually your GP will have to wait for the test results to tell which type you have.

Important

It's very rare that someone needs to have their tonsils taken out.

This is usually only the case if you have severe tonsillitis that keeps coming back.

Complications with tonsillitis (quinsy)

Complications with tonsillitis are very rare. If they happen, they mostly affect young children aged 2 to 4.

Sometimes you can get a pocket filled with pus (abscess) between your tonsils and the wall of your throat. This is called quinsy.

Urgent advice: See a GP urgently or go to A&E if you have:

- a severe sore throat that quickly gets worse
- swelling inside the mouth and throat
- difficulty speaking
- difficulty swallowing
- difficulty breathing
- difficulty opening your mouth

These are signs of quinsy.