

TONSILLITIS

BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Inflammation of the tonsils (lymph glands located at the back of the throat). Tonsils are small at birth, enlarge during childhood, and become smaller at puberty. Tonsils normally help prevent infection in the sinuses, mouth and throat from spreading to other body parts. Tonsillitis is contagious. It affects all ages, but is most common in children between ages 5 and 10.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Throat pain, either mild or severe.
- Swallowing with difficulty.
- Chills and fever as high as 104° F (40° C) or more.
- Swollen lymph glands on either side of the jaw.
- Headache.
- Ear pain.
- Cough (sometimes).
- Vomiting (sometimes).
- Refusal to eat in a very young child.

CAUSES

Bacterial (usually streptococcal) or viral infection of the tonsils.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Crowded living conditions (e.g., military recruits).
- Exposure to others in public places.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Avoid exposure to people with upper-respiratory infections.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Usually spontaneous recovery. Symptoms generally begin to improve in 2 to 3 days, but treatment may last longer. If attacks of tonsillitis are so severe and frequent that they affect one's general health or interfere with schooling, hearing or breathing, surgery to remove the tonsils may be recommended. A tonsillectomy involves small risk, but the risk increases with age.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Abscess of the tonsils and nearby throat area, requiring surgery to drain.
- Chronic tonsillitis, with a recurrent sore throat and greatly enlarged tonsils, caused by repeated attacks.
- Rheumatic fever, if the bacterial infection is streptococcal and it is not treated with antibiotics, or if antibiotics are discontinued before 10 days.

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests may include throat culture. Family members may have throat culture also, so that carriers can be identified and treated.
- Treatment is usually with antibiotics and self-care. Surgery to remove the tonsils for repeated acute tonsillitis, or for chronic tonsillitis may be needed.
- Use a cool-mist, ultrasonic humidifier to relieve throat irritation and cough. Clean humidifier daily.
- Prepare a soothing tea or other gargle. Double the usual strength of tea. This may be gargled warm or cold as often as is soothing.

MEDICATIONS

- If the tonsillitis is caused by a streptococcal infection, take prescribed penicillin or other antibiotics for at least 10 days.
- To relieve pain, you may use acetaminophen.

ACTIVITY

- Stay away from others until fever, pain and other symptoms disappear.
- Bed rest, except to use the bathroom, is necessary until fever subsides. Normal activity may be resumed when temperature has been normal for 2 or 3 days.

DIET

Increase all fluid intake. While the throat is very sore, use liquid nourishment, such as milk shakes, soups, and high-protein fluids (diet or instant-breakfast milk drinks).

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of tonsillitis. If there is any difficulty breathing, call immediately.
- Symptoms worsen or the following occur during treatment:
 - Temperature is normal for 1 or 2 days, then fever returns.
 - New symptoms begin, such as nausea, vomiting, skin rash, thick nasal drainage, chest pain, or shortness of breath.
 - There is a convulsion.
 - Joints become red or painful.
 - Cough produces a discolored (green, yellow, brown or bloody) sputum.

Adapted from Instructions for Patients, Sixth Edition, H. Winter Griffith, M.D., W.B Saunders Company.

TREATMENT