

## Rheumatic Heart Disease Summary Information

### What is strep throat?

Group A streptococcal bacteria (or strep bacteria) can infect the throat and make it sore. This condition is called “strep throat” or pharyngitis.

### What are the symptoms of strep throat?

Typical symptoms of a strep throat include:

- A sore red throat. Sometimes thick pus-like fluid is found around the tonsils. However, the throat also may appear quite “normal” with no obvious signs of infection.
- Fever that begins suddenly and often is highest on the second day and may be accompanied by chills.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Enlarged and tender lymph nodes in and around the neck.
- Nausea, vomiting, and abdominal complaints, especially in children.
- Headache.
- General ill feeling.
- Loss of appetite and abnormal taste.

### Why should we care about sore throats?

Sore throats are important because an untreated strep throat can trigger an autoimmune reaction that leads to rheumatic fever.

- An autoimmune reaction occurs when the body's immune system mistakenly reacts against some of its own tissue and produces antibodies to attack itself.
- In the case of rheumatic fever, this reaction may cause inflammation (swelling) of other parts of the body, particularly the joints, heart, skin, and brain.
- Inflammation of the heart may lead to long-term damage of the heart valves.

### Do all sore throats lead to rheumatic fever?

- Most sore throats are caused by a virus and go away in a few days.
- When a sore throat is caused by the group A streptococcus bacteria (strep throat), it could lead to rheumatic fever.
- Only a throat swab can tell if the group A streptococcus bacteria is present.
- If a child or young person complains about having a sore throat, make sure he or she gets checked by a doctor or health professional.

## How can the group A strep bacteria be prevented from spreading?

- Group A streptococcus bacteria are highly contagious and easily spread through
  - Coughing and sneezing around others.
  - Not washing hands.
  - Sharing toothbrushes.
  - Sharing drinks.
- Ensure children wash and dry their hands, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Teach children to cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing.

## How can rheumatic fever be prevented?

- If the throat swab shows that group A strep bacteria are present, the doctor usually will prescribe antibiotics that will need to be taken for 10 days.
- **It is very important that the entire 10-day course be completed to prevent rheumatic fever from developing.**
- By taking sore throats seriously, we can help prevent lifelong illness and suffering for our children.

## What happens if a child is diagnosed with rheumatic fever?

- Children who are diagnosed with rheumatic fever will need to go to hospital for bed rest, antibiotics, blood tests, and heart checks.
- Hospital admissions for rheumatic fever are generally prolonged, with an average stay of 22 days.
- Once discharged from hospital, they will need to receive injections of penicillin every 21 to 28 days for at least 10 years (or until they reach the age of 21 years, whichever is longer) to prevent a recurrence of rheumatic fever and subsequent heart damage.
- They will need regular doctor visits and dental checks.
- They will need to take extra antibiotics before some types of dental treatment to prevent tiny bacteria from entering into the bloodstream and causing further damage to the heart (this is called [infective endocarditis](#)).

## What happens if a child is also diagnosed with rheumatic heart disease?

- Children who have sustained damage to their heart valve may need to stay in the hospital longer.
- Children with rheumatic heart disease may need penicillin injections for a longer period (for at least 10 years or until they are 30 years old). The duration of monthly injections depends on a number of factors, including age, severity of [carditis](#) (inflammation of the heart), risk of strep throat, and the length of time since the last episode of rheumatic fever.
- Children with rheumatic heart disease will need special care when visiting the dentist and may eventually need surgery to repair the damaged heart valve.