

Group A Streptococcus Fact Sheet

What is group A streptococcus?

Group A streptococcus (group A strep) is a bacterium (*Streptococcus pyogenes*) that commonly lives on a person's skin or in their nose and throat. Many people carry the bacteria but never become ill. However, group A strep infection also can cause a variety of mild to severe illnesses.

How does a person become infected with group A strep?

- A person can become infected with group A strep by direct contact with an infected person, with their nasal secretions or saliva, or their infected wound.
- A person may spread group A strep for up to 3 weeks after becoming infected if they have not received antibiotics. People are unlikely to spread the infection after they have been on correct antibiotics for 24 hours or longer.
- A person who has group A strep on their skin, or in their nose or throat can spread the bacteria even if they were never ill. However, they are less likely to spread the bacteria to others than someone with an active infection.
- Group A strep may also be spread through food, if someone is infected with group A strep and then prepares or serves food which is shared with others.

What are the symptoms of illness caused by group A strep infection?

Group A strep infection can cause many different types of illness, from mild to severe illness. Severe illness can result in death.

Mild illnesses caused by Group A strep include:

- Strep throat - an infection which leads to sore throat with fever, in some cases people may also have pain with swallowing, swollen glands in the neck, or headache.
- Impetigo - an infection of the skin where people will have open sores on the skin that drain pus. Additionally, people may also have fever and a sore throat at the same time.
- Scarlet fever - a raised rash on the body that usually feels like sandpaper.

More severe illness can occur when the bacteria move from the skin or throat into the blood or infect deeper tissues or organs (e.g., lungs, muscles, brain). Severe illnesses include:

- Pneumonia - an infection in the lungs with fever, cough, and trouble breathing.
- Necrotizing fasciitis - an infection of the skin and muscles, with severe pain/swelling at the wound or trauma site and fever.
- Meningitis - an infection of the fluid surrounding the brain, with headache, fever, neck pain, or confusion.
- Streptococcal Toxic Shock Syndrome (STSS) - an infection of the blood that could lead to lung, kidney, and/or liver failure. People may have fever, dizziness/confusion, abdominal pain, rash, or shock.

How common are group A strep infections?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that each year in the United States, there are several million cases of mild group A strep infections, and 11,000 to 13,000 cases of severe group A strep infections with 1,100 to 1,600 deaths.

How is group A strep infection diagnosed?

Depending on the symptoms, a healthcare provider may order a number of different tests, take a throat swab, or get a blood sample.

How is group A strep infection treated?

Group A strep infection may be treated with antibiotics prescribed by your healthcare provider. If you have strep throat, stay home from work or school until after you have taken antibiotics for 24 hours. This reduces chances of infecting others. It is important to take all of the antibiotics as directed. Prompt diagnosis and treatment of group A strep infections helps prevent more severe illness and complications.

Severe group A strep infections often require hospitalization as these infections require rapid treatment to prevent complications or death. Infections can progress rapidly, so it is very important to see your healthcare provider as soon as possible. Although rare, severe illness or death may occur even with proper antibiotic treatment.

Who is at greatest risk for becoming ill with group A strep?

For many people, exposure to group A strep will not result in infection. Some people may have a mild infection, like a sore throat or a skin infection.

More severe illness may occur if a person has a weakened immune system, diabetes, kidney failure, or require chronic steroids. People who were recently infected with the flu or another respiratory infection, or recently had the chicken pox, are also at higher risk for severe disease.

What can a person do to prevent group A strep infections?

- Wash hands frequently especially after coughing or sneezing, before eating, and before preparing food.
- Keep wounds clean and watch closely for signs of infection such as increased redness, swelling, pain, or drainage of pus. See your healthcare provider quickly if any of those signs develop.
- If you develop a sore throat with fever, discuss with your healthcare provider if you need to be seen, tested, or treated for strep throat.
- If someone in your household develops a severe group A strep infection, talk to your healthcare provider about what you can do to decrease your chance of getting sick.

What is the California Department of Public Health doing about group A strep infections?

Outbreaks of group A strep infections are investigated by the local health department and/or the California Department of Public Health.

Where can I find more information about group A strep?

More information is available on the [CDC group A streptococcus webpage](https://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/index.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/index.html>).

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