



Durham Region Health Department Facts about...



Group A Streptococcal Infection

What is it?

Group A streptococcal infection (GAS) is caused by bacteria. These bacteria are often found in the throat and on the skin. The most common illnesses caused by GAS are *strep throat* and *impetigo*. These illnesses can sometimes result in scarlet fever, rheumatic fever and kidney problems. **Rarely**, the bacteria can invade parts of the body where bacteria are usually not found such as the blood, muscle or lungs. These infections are called *invasive group A streptococcal infections*. Two of the most severe, but less common forms of invasive GAS infections are *necrotizing fasciitis* ("flesh-eating disease") and *streptococcal toxic shock syndrome*.

How is it spread?

The bacteria are spread from person-to-person, most commonly by:

- Droplet spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes;
- Direct or indirect contact with saliva, nose, throat or wound secretions of an infected person; Sharing water bottles, straws, eating utensils, cigarettes, contaminated needles, toothbrushes and toys with an infected person

People who are at increased risk for GAS include persons with skin breakdown (e.g., burns, wounds, chickenpox), health conditions such as: HIV infection, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease, as well as children younger than two years of age, older adults over 65 years old, and post-partum and postsurgical patients. Intravenous drug use, alcohol abuse, and homelessness are also associated with an increased risk of GAS disease.

What do I look for?

Signs and symptoms depend on the type of illness caused by the bacteria. Some people can carry the bacteria in the throat or on the skin without symptoms. Symptoms may include pain, swelling, fever, chills, flu-like symptoms, generalized muscle aches, flat red rash that may be over large areas of the body, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, tiredness, or joint pain.

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- Strep throat causes fever, sore throat, and swollen lymph glands.
- Impetigo causes red bumps or blisters on the skin which may drain clear fluid or become covered by an itchy honey-coloured crust.
- Scarlet fever causes a body rash, rash inside the mouth, strep throat, and a strawberry tongue.
- Early signs and symptoms of necrotizing fasciitis may include fever, severe pain, fatigue, vomiting, diarrhea, and swelling and redness of skin tissue, which spreads rapidly.
- Early signs and symptoms of streptococcal toxic shock syndrome are fever, dizziness, confusion, shortness of breath, and/or low blood pressure.

How is it treated?

GAS infections can be treated with antibiotics. The antibiotics must be taken as prescribed until finished, although the person is considered not infectious to others after taking the proper antibiotics for 24 hours. Early treatment may reduce the risk of complications from invasive GAS disease. For people with invasive GAS, hospitalization and/or surgery may be needed.

How can I protect myself?

- Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizers when hands are not visibly dirty.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow and encourage others to do the same.
- Wash your hands after handling nose and throat discharges (i.e., after disposal of facial tissues containing nose and throat discharges).
- Do not share water bottles, straws, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, toys, or anything that has been in contact with saliva, nose, or throat secretions.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and children should receive the chickenpox vaccine. See *Facts About... Chickenpox Vaccine*
- If you have a sore throat and fever you should see your health care provider. People with strep throat should stay home from work, school, or child care until 24 hours after beginning proper antibiotics.
- Keep all wounds clean and watch for signs of infection such as redness, swelling, drainage and pain. Anyone with signs of infection, especially if fever develops, should see a doctor.
- If you are ill, stay at home and isolate yourself from others.

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