



Group A Streptococcal Infections

What are Group A Streptococcal infections?

Group A Streptococcus (GAS or “strep”) bacteria can infect anyone at any age. Infections generally result in mild illnesses. In rare cases the bacteria may enter the body and cause infections of the blood, muscles or lungs, and cause severe illness and tissue damage.

The most common infection is strep throat. Other types of common infections include skin and wound infections, ear and sinus infections, and infections in the lymph glands. More serious infections (called “invasive”) can occur in other parts of the body including the lungs, joints and the membranes around the heart and brain. Severe forms of GAS infection cause streptococcal toxic shock syndrome, and necrotizing fasciitis (also known as flesh-eating disease). Less commonly, GAS can also cause scarlet fever, rheumatic fever and a form of kidney ailment called glomerulonephritis.

Strep throat starts suddenly with high fever, headache, a swollen red throat and tonsils, swollen lymph nodes in the neck and, in children, abdominal pain.

Scarlet fever usually starts with a red rash on the body, which can spread quickly. It feels like sandpaper, fades if you put pressure on it and can cause the skin to peel off. Other symptoms include red swollen lips and red spots on the tongue, sometimes called ‘strawberry tongue’.

Impetigo is a skin infection and common in children. The bacteria gets into scrapes, cold sores, insect bites or patches of eczema. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#81 Impetigo](#).

Rheumatic fever occurs when the strep infection damages the heart’s valves and may lead to congestive heart failure or swelling of the lining of the heart. It is a rare complication of strep throat.

Toxic shock syndrome is a rare and serious result of invasive infection of group A streptococcus. Symptoms include fever and redness of the skin, shock due to low blood pressure, diarrhea, vomiting and severe muscle pain. In some cases, it can be fatal. It is caused by a toxin produced by the bacteria and can affect all body organs. In B.C., about 1 in 20 cases of invasive GAS result in toxic shock syndrome. It is more common in children, older adults, those with chickenpox, and people with diabetes, chronic heart or lung disease, or those who abuse alcohol or inject drugs.

For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#04 Toxic Shock Syndrome](#).

Necrotizing fasciitis is a very severe infection more commonly known as flesh-eating disease. It can spread fast through the flesh surrounding muscles. In some cases, death can occur within 18 hours. In other cases, surgery is required to remove the affected body tissue or limb.

The original site of infection may be a minor wound or injury such as a small cut, insect bite or bruise.

For more information see HealthLink BC File [#60 Necrotizing Fasciitis](#).

Who is at risk of getting group A streptococcal infection?

Household members of a person with GAS or those who have direct contact with the mouth or nose secretions of an infected person are at higher risk of getting infected. However, most infections occur from contact with those whose infection is not causing symptoms.

GAS infection is more common in those with chickenpox.

How is it spread?

Group A streptococcus is often found in the nose and throat and on the skin of healthy people.

It is normally passed from person to person through close contact such as kissing, sharing drinking cups, forks, spoons or cigarettes.

What is the treatment for group A streptococcal infection?

Antibiotics are recommended for people with invasive group A streptococcus disease.

If you are in contact with someone with invasive group A streptococcus you may require antibiotics.

How can I prevent group A streptococcal infection?

- Wash your hands often.
- Do not share straws, cups, bottles, forks, spoons, cigarettes or anything with saliva (spit) on it.

- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or sleeve, or use a tissue and then throw it out and wash your hands.
- Keep all wounds clean and watch for redness, swelling, oozing, fever or increasing pain at the wound site.
- Get the chickenpox vaccine if you are not already protected.
- If symptoms occur, get treated early and do not go to work or school.
- If you are in close contact with a person with invasive GAS, immediately see your doctor or call your local public health unit.



BC Centre for Disease Control
AN AGENCY OF THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1 for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.