



Q1) Oh, My Throat!

Recently, I had a throat infection which the doctor diagnosed as pharyngitis. It was accompanied by a fever that lasted a week. After a five-day course of antibiotics, the infection went away. But a few days later, my throat became inflamed again and I had another fever spell. The doctor gave me stronger antibiotics, and eventually the swelling and fever went away. However, I developed a cough. What could be causing this series of infections and why did I get another infection after that first course of antibiotics?

The most likely cause of your infection is a virus. These are responsible for over 80 per cent of pharyngitis infections and do not respond to antibiotics — which only treat bacteria. The fact that your throat appeared to get better after the first course of antibiotics doesn't mean that it was a bacterial infection, since most viral throat infections get better on their own within 5-10 days.

There are several explanations for your sore throat returning after you finished the first course of antibiotics. It is possible that the first antibiotic disturbed the normal bacterial flora in the throat and that your returning symptoms were actually due to a secondary bacterial infection. Or perhaps your first infection was indeed bacterial, but that you did not take the antibiotic long enough or at a sufficient dose to eradicate the infection — in which case the infection returned as soon as you stopped the antibiotic. Mixed bacterial infections are also possible.

In this situation, the first antibiotic may have treated one of the bacteria but not all, meaning that your symptoms improved before the other resistant bacteria flourished, leading to a return of your symptoms.

The clear message is that the length and severity of symptoms from pharyngitis are not usually improved by taking antibiotics. In these types of infections, antibiotics should be reserved for those patients with complications — e.g tonsillitis, quinsy — or those with weakened immune systems such as the elderly and diabetics.

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