

How Strep Throat Can Turn Deadly

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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December through April is prime time for strep throat season. But it hasn't been the amount of cases this month that has OSF HealthCare providers and infectious disease leaders concerned, it's the severity of the cases. In fact, two children under the age of 10 in central Illinois have died due to strep infections recently.

"Cases that can cause sepsis or a blood stream infection," Jamie Almasy, the Director of Infection Prevention for OSF HealthCare says. "Invasive infections caused by the group A Strep bacteria are what we're seeing more cases of. Invasive means that germs invade parts of the body that are normally free from germs."

So how can you prevent getting strep throat? Almasy says the steps are straight forward.

"It's back to your basics. Really good hand hygiene, make sure you're covering your cough," Almasy says. "If you are sick or have symptoms of strep throat, make sure you go and get tested."

Almasy says strep throat is spread through droplets. Symptoms include a sore throat and fever. She recommends keeping your distance from other people when you are feeling ill and staying up-to-date on your vaccinations.

"Diseases like the flu or chicken pox can increase your risk for catching an invasive strep infection," she says.

Dr. Brian Curtis, vice president of the clinical specialty services at OSF HealthCare, says the throat isn't the only place to keep an eye on when looking for strep infection.

"Group A strep can also cause skin infections," Dr. Curtis says. "It can cause necrotizing fasciitis and then it can also cause an erysipelas, which are very fast-spreading skin and soft tissue infections which people can get very sick very quickly from."

Dr. Curtis says most strep throat cases are mild, but there are other risk factors that spread quickly, and require a quick response from the patient. If your child has a skin infection or high fever, Dr. Curtis says to have them seen right away.

"They seem to be acting right, then they're not acting right in a very short period of time," he says. "If you have a child that has a skin or soft tissue infection that seems to be spreading fairly rapidly, it is best to get them checked out."

"People who are pre-disposed to that are people who have chicken pox (varicella). It's a common source of infected pox lesions. That's why we really encourage people to get the varicella vaccine in their children when they're able to get it," Dr. Curtis adds.

People who are immunocompromised are also at a higher risk for a more severe strep infection, in addition to individuals undergoing chemotherapy, children under age 1, pregnant women and the elderly, Dr. Curtis says.

“Pregnant women are very susceptible to group A strep,” Dr. Curtis adds.

So why does strep spread so quickly during the December-April timeframe?

“It tends to be a time where people are very close together,” Dr. Curtis says. “Especially in the Midwest or the northern climates with the snow and cold weather. Strep throat is very easy to spread. You can have someone who is an asymptomatic carrier and that can spread it to you. That’s where we recommend people wash their hands frequently, don’t share utensils, and don’t share cups.”

Wondering if you have strep throat versus a sore throat? Dr. Curtis offers some tips on how to tell the difference. “Strep throat tends to be very isolated on sore throat, fever, swollen glands.”

Dr. Curtis adds if you have red eyes and nasal congestion along with the cough and sore throat, that’s normally a viral infection.