

ENGLISH



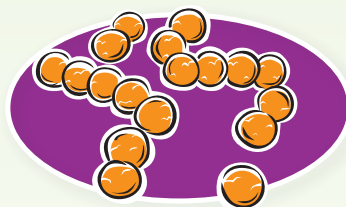
*Preventing Rheumatic Fever*

# Sore throats and rheumatic fever



## **This guide is information for families, whanau, parents, aiga and caregivers about rheumatic fever.**

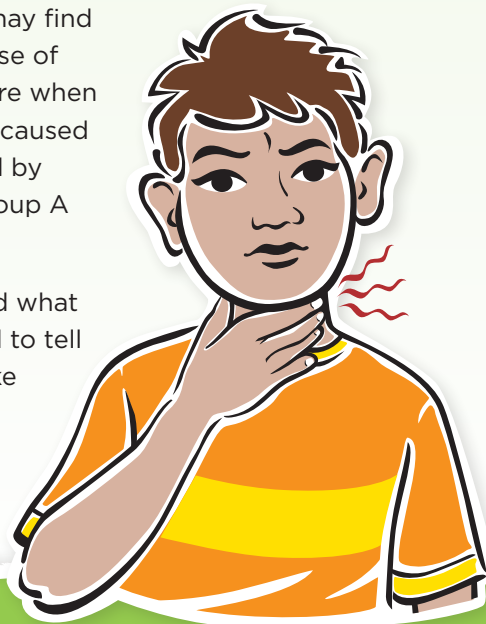
Rheumatic fever is a serious illness in our communities. It mainly affects Māori and Pacific children (aged 4 to 19 years) especially if someone in the family has had it before. Rheumatic fever starts with a sore throat that is known as a 'strep throat' – a throat infection caused by a bacterial infection or bug called Group A Streptococcus. If the 'strep throat' is not treated with antibiotics it can cause rheumatic fever.



### **What is a sore throat?**

A sore throat is pain or discomfort in the throat making it swollen. Your child may find it hard to swallow, eat or drink because of pain in their throat. Often it hurts more when your child swallows. Sore throats are caused by a virus or by 'strep throat' (caused by a bacterial infection or bug called Group A Streptococcus).

You may need to explain to your child what a sore throat feels like. Ask your child to tell you if they have a sore throat and take notice if they are having problems swallowing, eating or drinking.



## What do you do if your child has a sore throat?



Every time your child has a sore throat take them to get their throat checked straight away. This could be at the doctor or nurse, or they may be at a school where this can be done. Don't wait to see if your child's throat gets better. They may already have 'strep throat' and it needs to get treated immediately. By treating sore throats early it can stop rheumatic fever from developing.

The doctor or nurse will check the throat and if it is 'strep throat' your child will need to take antibiotics for 10 days. It is important that your child takes all of the antibiotics to make sure they get rid of the infection and to stop getting rheumatic fever. Even if your child's throat feels better, they need to keep taking the antibiotics until they are all finished. If their throat is still sore after they have finished the antibiotics, make sure you take them back to see the doctor or nurse.

## Why is it so important to get every sore throat checked?

Your child's sore throat could be 'strep throat' which, if not treated, can cause rheumatic fever. Your child may get a lot of sore throats but you need to get it checked every time and straight away. It is important not to leave a sore throat as rheumatic fever will make your child very unwell.



## What is rheumatic fever?

Rheumatic fever is a serious illness which is an inflammatory disease that can cause the heart, joints (elbows, wrists, ankles and knees), brain and the skin to become swollen and painful. It can lead to rheumatic heart disease, which causes serious heart problems.

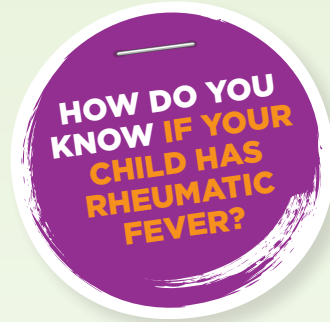
### How rheumatic fever develops

Group A Streptococcus 'strep throat'  
*If left untreated can cause...*

A rare abnormal reaction in your  
child's body  
*That develops into...*

Rheumatic fever  
*That can cause...*

Rheumatic heart disease



## The symptoms

A few weeks after having a 'strep throat' your child may develop:

- sore and swollen joints (knees, elbows, ankles and wrists). Joints may feel hot as well. Different joints may be sore on different days
- an on-going fever that lasts a few days.

*If your child has these symptoms take them to the doctor or nurse straight away to get them checked.*

They may also have:

- stomach pains
- extreme tiredness
- weight loss
- an unusual looking rash on their body, arms and legs.

## How does rheumatic fever affect the heart?

If your child has more attacks of rheumatic fever then they may develop rheumatic heart disease. This can cause serious heart problems damaging your child's heart forever and they may need to have an operation on their heart. They will also need to have regular antibiotic injections to prevent them from getting rheumatic fever again.

Rheumatic heart disease is an 'autoimmune disease' causing a problem with the immune system. The immune system is the cells and organs that protect the body against illnesses and infections.

Rheumatic heart disease happens when your child's immune system makes a mistake and attacks your child's heart instead of the germs from an illness.



*Sometimes the doctor or nurse will take a swab of your child's throat.*

## What does it mean if my child has rheumatic fever?

If your child develops rheumatic fever they need a lot of bed rest and time off school. Your child will need to go to hospital and stay there for a few weeks. They will have examinations and blood tests to check their condition.

Rheumatic fever can affect your child's life, making it more difficult for them to play sport or do other activities as they will be very tired and have less energy.



## What can you do to stop rheumatic fever?

Tell your doctor, nurse or community health worker if other children or young people in your home have a sore throat because they might need to be checked.

To stop strep throat from spreading, your child needs to cover their mouth when coughing or sneezing. Children can cough and sneeze when they are asleep too. Ask your community health worker about ways to stop germs from spreading while children are sleeping.

## What communities say about rheumatic fever

Tavita says “If we can prevent our children and ourselves from getting this disease, it will save us from a lot of heartache and distress.” Until recently he didn’t know much about rheumatic fever but his new awareness has encouraged him to think more seriously about his children’s health. “I realise now that rheumatic fever is a huge issue. Symptoms can sometimes be farmed off as a cold or light flu, but they’re serious,” he says.

*Parent*

In his many years of teaching, Ben has had three children in his classes with serious bouts of rheumatic fever that saw them hospitalised and then on medication for several years.

“It affected their school work. They were away for long periods of time. It just seemed to wipe them out, so that even when they were at school they were really tired. It has such a huge impact.”

*Primary school teacher*

It wasn’t until Moana’s son had a bout of ill health that she began to take an interest in rheumatic fever. “I started to take notice because I was concerned for my boy and didn’t want to be careless with his health,” she says. “Rheumatic fever flies under the radar a bit. The threat of these things is always magnified when someone you love or care for has symptoms or gets it, but with rheumatic fever you don’t want to wait for that.”

*Parent*



**Every time your child has a sore throat, take them to your doctor or nurse straight away.**

Don't wait, it could mean your child could get rheumatic fever.

*For more information*

Call Healthline **0800 611 116** or visit us online [www.health.govt.nz/rheumaticfever](http://www.health.govt.nz/rheumaticfever)



**STOP  
SORE THROATS  
HURTING HEARTS**

*Preventing Rheumatic Fever*