

# Group A Streptococcus (GAS)

## **What is group A streptococcus (GAS)?**

Group A *Streptococcus* is a bacteria often found in the throat and on the skin. People may carry group A streptococci in the throat or on the skin and have no symptoms of illness. Most GAS infections are relatively mild illnesses such as "strep throat," or impetigo. Occasionally these bacteria can cause severe and even life-threatening diseases.

## **How are group A streptococci spread?**

These bacteria are spread through direct contact with mucus from the nose or throat of persons who are infected or through contact with infected wounds or sores on the skin. Ill persons, such as those who have strep throat or skin infections, are most likely to spread the infection. Persons who carry the bacteria but have no symptoms are much less contagious. Treating an infected person with an antibiotic generally eliminates their ability to spread the bacteria. However, it is important to complete the entire course of antibiotics as prescribed.

## **Why does invasive group A streptococcal disease occur?**

Invasive GAS infections occur when the bacteria get past the defenses of the person who is infected. This may occur when a person has sores or other breaks in the skin that allow the bacteria to get into the tissue, or when the person's ability to fight off the infection is decreased because of chronic illness or an illness that affects the immune system. Also, some virulent strains of GAS are more likely to cause severe disease than others.

## **Who is most at risk of getting invasive group A streptococcal disease?**

Only a few people who come in contact with GAS will develop invasive GAS disease. Most people will have a throat or skin infection, and some may have no symptoms at all.

Although healthy people can get invasive GAS disease, people with chronic illnesses like cancer, diabetes, and chronic heart or lung disease, and those who use medications such as steroids have a higher risk. Persons with skin lesions (such as cuts, chicken pox, surgical wounds) the elderly & young are also at risk.

## **What can be done to help prevent group A streptococcal infections?**

**The spread of all types of GAS infection can be reduced by good hand washing, especially after coughing and sneezing and before preparing foods or eating.**

Persons with sore throats should be seen by a doctor who can perform tests to find out whether the illness is strep throat. If the test result shows strep throat, the person should stay home from work, school, or day care as advised by their doctor.

All wounds should be kept clean and watched for possible signs of infection such as redness, swelling, drainage, and pain at the wound site. A person with signs of an infected wound, especially if fever occurs, should seek medical advice promptly.