A sore throat can be painful and worrying, but it does not always need a GP appointment or antibiotics. In England, the NHS Pharmacy First service lets eligible people get advice and treatment for certain common conditions, including sore throat, from a community pharmacist.

So, if you visit a pharmacy with a sore throat, will they test you for an infection? Usually, the pharmacist will carry out a **clinical assessment** rather than routinely taking a throat swab. They will ask about your symptoms, check how unwell you are and decide whether Pharmacy First advice or treatment is suitable—or whether you need another service.

This guide explains what to expect from a **sore throat Pharmacy First** appointment, when testing may be relevant, and **when to see a GP for a sore throat**.

What is NHS Pharmacy First?

NHS Pharmacy First is a service in England that enables community pharmacists to assess and treat some common conditions without you first needing to see a GP. Depending on the condition and your circumstances, a pharmacist may offer advice, supply an appropriate medicine under NHS arrangements, or refer you to another healthcare professional.

It is part of the wider role of community pharmacy. Pharmacies are not just places to collect prescriptions: pharmacists can help people manage minor illnesses, explain how to use medicines and identify symptoms that need further assessment. Pharmacy First can provide faster access for suitable problems, while helping GP teams focus on care that needs their input.

The service covers seven common conditions, including sore throat, earache, sinusitis, impetigo, shingles, infected insect bites and urinary tract infections in some women. The pathways have eligibility rules, so not every https://healthylifeessex.co.uk/2026/10/the-changing-role-of-community-pharmacies/ person with a symptom will be treated through Pharmacy First. The pharmacist will explain what is appropriate and advise on other options if needed.

Will a pharmacist test my sore throat?

For most Pharmacy First sore throat consultations, the pharmacist's main tool is a **pharmacist clinical assessment**, not a routine laboratory test. They will usually ask about your symptoms and medical history, and may look at your throat if appropriate. They may also check for signs that suggest you need urgent medical care.

A sore throat is commonly caused by a virus, and antibiotics do not work against viral infections. Some cases are caused by bacteria, such as group A streptococcus, but symptoms alone do not always make the cause certain. The pharmacist uses the relevant NHS pathway and clinical judgement to decide what to recommend. This may include self-care advice, suitable treatment or referral.

Throat swabs and rapid tests are not a routine part of every NHS Pharmacy First sore throat consultation. Whether a test is available or appropriate can depend on the service and clinical circumstances. Do not assume that a pharmacy visit will include a swab, or that a test is needed before the pharmacist can advise you.

If the pharmacist thinks your symptoms need assessment beyond the Pharmacy First pathway, they can direct you to a GP, NHS 111 or urgent care, depending on how quickly you need help. A referral is not a failure of the service: it is one way the pharmacist helps you reach the right level of care.

What happens during a Pharmacy First sore throat appointment?

The pharmacist will ask questions to understand how your illness started, how it has changed and whether you have other symptoms. They may ask about your age, existing health conditions, allergies, medicines and any treatments you have already tried. Be as specific as you can, including whether you have a fever, a cough, a rash or difficulty swallowing.

The consultation is intended to establish whether the sore throat can be managed through the pharmacy pathway or whether you need a different service. The pharmacist may use a structured clinical approach to consider the likelihood of a bacterial infection and whether an antibiotic is appropriate. This is not the same as confirming a diagnosis with a swab.

After the assessment, you may receive:

- **Self-care advice:** for example, how to ease discomfort and what to expect as the illness improves.
- **Advice about suitable medicines:** the pharmacist can discuss options and check whether they are safe for you.
- **Treatment through the NHS pathway:** if you meet the relevant criteria, a medicine may be supplied under the service arrangements.
- **A recommendation to contact another service:** this might be your GP, NHS 111 or urgent care, depending on your symptoms.

The pharmacist should explain the next steps and what signs to look out for. If your condition worsens or does not improve as expected, seek further advice rather than simply waiting it out.

Does Pharmacy First mean I will get antibiotics?

No. Antibiotics are not automatically given for a sore throat, even if the pain is severe. Many sore throats get better without antibiotics, and unnecessary antibiotic use can cause side effects and contribute to antimicrobial resistance.

The pharmacist will consider the clinical pathway and whether treatment is appropriate for you. They will also take account of factors such as your symptoms, age, medical history and any risks. If an antibiotic is not recommended, you can still receive useful advice about managing symptoms and when to seek help again.

If you are prescribed or supplied a medicine, follow the instructions given by the pharmacist. Ask if you are unsure about how to take it, possible side effects or whether it is suitable alongside your regular medicines.



When to see a GP for a sore throat

Most sore throats improve within about a week, but you should seek medical advice if symptoms are severe, persistent or getting worse. Pharmacy First is intended for suitable cases; it does not replace a GP assessment when one is needed.



Contact your GP practice or NHS 111 for advice if you have concerns, particularly if you have a weakened immune system, a significant long-term condition, repeated episodes, or symptoms that are not improving. You may also need GP advice if a child is unwell or you are unsure whether the Pharmacy First pathway applies.

Get urgent medical help if you have difficulty breathing, cannot swallow, are drooling because you cannot swallow, or develop severe symptoms that are worsening quickly. Call 999 or go to A&E for a life-threatening emergency. If you are uncertain about the urgency, NHS 111 can help direct you to the right service.

Situation What to do Mild sore throat and otherwise feeling reasonably well Ask a community pharmacist for advice, including whether Pharmacy First is suitable. Symptoms are severe, persistent, worsening or you have

additional health concerns Contact your GP practice or NHS 111 for guidance. Breathing or swallowing is seriously affected, or you are rapidly becoming very unwell Seek urgent medical help; call 999 for a life-threatening emergency.

How to prepare for a pharmacy assessment

You do not usually need to prepare for a Pharmacy First consultation, but a few details can help the pharmacist assess you efficiently:

- When the sore throat began and whether it is getting better or worse.
- Any other symptoms, such as a fever, cough, rash or difficulty swallowing.
- Your regular medicines, allergies and relevant health conditions.
- What you have already tried and whether it helped.

Pharmacy First is available through participating community pharmacies in England. You can contact a pharmacy directly to ask about the service and whether a consultation is available. The NHS England website and the NHS Pharmacy First information can help you understand the service and its pathways; your local pharmacy can explain how it operates in practice.

Community pharmacies offer more than illness advice

Many community pharmacies provide other services alongside prescriptions and consultations for common conditions. Depending on the pharmacy, these may include **flu vaccinations**, **travel vaccinations** and **travel health consultations with risk assessment**. Availability varies, so check with the pharmacy before making plans.

A travel health consultation can help you discuss your destination, planned activities and health needs, so that appropriate advice and vaccinations can be considered. It is sensible to arrange this well ahead of travel: some vaccines need more than one dose or time to take effect. The pharmacist can advise whether the pharmacy offers the service you need or whether you should contact another provider.

These services illustrate how community pharmacies can support prevention as well as treatment. A pharmacist may help with a minor illness today, provide vaccination advice before a trip, or direct you to another part of the NHS when your needs are more complex.

Are there charges for Pharmacy First?

No prices were stated in the scraped content, so it would be misleading to quote a price or imply that a particular fee applies. The NHS Pharmacy First service in England is an NHS service, but the arrangements for any medicine supplied and any applicable prescription charge can depend on the circumstances and your eligibility for exemptions. Ask the pharmacist to confirm any charge before treatment is supplied.

Charges for optional services, such as travel vaccinations or travel health consultations, can also vary between providers and according to the service offered. Check directly with the pharmacy for current details rather than relying on an assumed price.

The bottom line: assessment first, not necessarily a test

If you visit a pharmacy with a sore throat, expect questions and a clinical assessment. A routine throat swab is not usually part of every NHS Pharmacy First consultation, and antibiotics are not automatic. The pharmacist will use

the NHS pathway to advise on self-care, treatment or referral based on your symptoms and circumstances.

For a suitable sore throat, Pharmacy First can offer quicker access to advice without waiting for a GP appointment. If symptoms are severe, worsening or concerning, the pharmacist can help you reach the right service—and urgent symptoms such as serious breathing or swallowing difficulties need prompt medical attention.