A Review of Tonsillectomy to Treat Sore Throats in Children

by Pamela Jones, MA

A sore throat is a common ailment in childhood. It may be caused by pharyngitis (inflammation of the top part of throat) or tonsillitis (inflammation of tonsils). In many cases, it is a combination of both. Most sore throats in children are caused by a virus, which passes in a few days without treatment. Strep throat, on the other hand, is a bacterial infection usually treated with antibiotics. Children who are prone to frequent strep infections are often recommended to have a tonsillectomy. This surgery removes the tonsil from the back of the throat. While this procedure is common, there is some controversy over when it is most appropriate to perform.

A group of researchers reviewed several past studies to determine the effectiveness of tonsillectomies to treat frequent sore throats. They found that the procedure has only modest benefits even in severely affected children.

About the Study

The systematic review examined five previous randomized trials. There were a total of 719 children aged 2-15 years and 70 children aged over 15. The studies evaluated the use of tonsillectomies for treating chronic or recurrent tonsillitis. According to the review, children most severely affected by recurrent sore throats would avoid three additional tonsillar infections per year if they had the surgery. Children less severely affected would avoid only one less infection per year.

How Does This Affect You?

All surgery carries some risk and should only be undertaken when the benefits clearly outweigh those risks. This study calls into question whether this is the case for tonsillectomy, particularly in children who are not severely affected by strep tonsillitis.

Most children with recurrent throat infections will eventually outgrow them. If your child suffers from frequent bouts of tonsillitis, surgery may or may not be indicated. Talk to your child’s doctor about all your options.

RESOURCES:

American Academy of Family Physicians
http://www.familydoctor.org/

American Academy of Pediatrics
http://www.aap.org/

REFERENCES:


Last reviewed April 2009 by Richard Glickman-Simon, MD