

Health Office Fact Sheet



Scarlet Fever

Scarlet fever is a mild infection characterised by a fine pinkish-red body rash which occurs after either a sore throat or skin infection. Scarlet fever is caused by bacteria known as group A streptococci, and these are responsible for a wide range of illnesses.

Although once considered a very serious childhood disease, scarlet fever is now usually mild, with severe cases rarely seen other than in developing countries. The term Scarlatina may also be used to describe a very mild form of the infection.

Who gets scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is most common in children and young adults, with the most common age of infection being 4 years of age. On occasion, outbreaks of scarlet fever occur in nurseries and schools. If you have had scarlet fever you are unlikely to get it again.

How do you get scarlet fever?

It is most commonly spread through droplet infection, produced by coughs and sneezes. Bacteria may survive on toys, hard surfaces such as tables and utensils, for periods of up to 12 hours.

How do you avoid getting scarlet fever?

It is probably very difficult to avoid catching scarlet fever, however the following points may help minimise the risks:

- Good hand hygiene – hand washing after using the toilet; before food preparation and eating; after coughing and sneezing.
- Not sharing kitchen utensils with somebody who has scarlet fever, cold like symptoms or a sore throat, before those utensils have been washed.
- Correct disposal of all used handkerchiefs, followed by good hand washing.
- Regular cleaning of communal toys and equipment will also help reduce the spread of infection.

What are the symptoms of scarlet fever, when do they appear and how long do they last?

- The first symptoms of scarlet fever often include a sore throat, headache, fever, nausea, and vomiting.
- Between 12 to 48 hours after this, the characteristic fine, red rash, like sandpaper to touch, develops. It typically appears first on the chest and stomach, rapidly spreading to other parts of the body. On more darkly pigmented skin, the scarlet rash may be harder to spot although the sandpaper feel should be present.
- Temperature - over 38.3° C (101° F) is common
- White coating on the tongue, which peels after a few days leaving the tongue looking red and swollen (known as 'strawberry tongue')
- Swollen glands in the neck
- Feeling tired and unwell
- Flushed red face, but pale around the mouth. The flushed face may appear more 'sunburnt' on darker skin.
- Skin may peel on the finger tips, toes, and groin area, as the rash fades

It usually takes 2 to 5 days from infection until the first symptoms to appear. However the incubation period may be as short as 1 day and as long as 7 days.

Scarlet fever usually clears up after a week, but it is always advisable to visit your GP to get a full diagnosis and proper treatment.

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What is the treatment for scarlet fever?

A short course of antibiotics will treat the illness, reduce the risk of complications and reduce the chance of the infection being passed on.

If you have a high temperature, drink plenty of fluids. Calpol/Brufen can be taken to bring down temperatures and relieve discomfort.

Are there any complications?

The majority of cases of scarlet fever have no complications at all. However, in the early stages of infection there is a very small risk that individuals may suffer from one of the following:

- Ear infection
- Throat abscess
- Pneumonia
- Inflammation of the sinuses (Sinusitis)
- Meningitis – (Rare)

On rare occasions the disease at a later stage could lead to one of the following:

- Bone or joint problems
- Liver damage
- Childrenney damage
- Acute rheumatic fever (which can damage the heart)

Parents should seek medical attention immediately if concerned re complications in the first few weeks after the main infection has cleared.

Should you stay away from work/school?

Children should remain at home for five days from the beginning of antibiotic treatment.

The following web sites were used to compile the above information

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk,

www.kidhealth.com

www.cdc.gov