

Rubella

What is rubella?

Rubella (also called German measles) is an illness caused by a virus. Rubella is highly contagious (easily spread from one person to another) among people who have never had it and haven't been vaccinated. Rubella is a mild illness for children. If acquired by a pregnant woman, complications may include birth defects, deafness, cataracts, miscarriage, heart defects, mental retardation, and liver and spleen damage. There is at least a 20% chance of damage to the fetus if a woman is infected early in pregnancy. It can also cause encephalitis (swelling of the brain), but this is very rare.

How do I get rubella?

Rubella is spread by breathing in droplets of an infected person's cough or sneeze. Touching used tissues or sharing a cup used by an infected person also spreads the virus. Infected people can spread the virus to others even if they do not feel sick.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually appear within 12-23 days after a person is exposed. Early in the illness, some people may not experience any symptoms, but will still be able to spread the virus to others. Symptoms include a mild fever, headache, swelling of the lymph glands (often in the back of the neck), and a rash (pink isolated spots which appear first on the face and trunk and spread to the forearms, hands and feet) that lasts two to three days. About half of all people who get the disease do not get the rash. Some people (especially women) get swollen and painful joints, but these symptoms don't last long.

How long is an infected person contagious (able to spread the disease)?

An infected person can spread the virus to others starting 7 days before the rash appears and for up to 7 days after the rash first appears.

Prevention

Immunization is the only effective way to prevent rubella:

- Immunize adults and children with the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine or the MMVR vaccine (which includes the vaccine for varicella or chickenpox).
- Follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommended childhood immunization schedule (ask your health care provider or local health department for a copy).
- Women of childbearing age who haven't had rubella or the rubella vaccine should get vaccinated with the rubella vaccine before they become pregnant. Women should not get vaccinated if they are pregnant or plan to become pregnant within 3 months after getting vaccinated.

Treatment for rubella

- Rubella can look like many other diseases that cause a rash. The only sure way to know if you have rubella is to get a blood test.
- If you have rubella or have been exposed to rubella and have not been fully immunized against the virus, contact your local health department or health care provider to find out if it is safe for you to go to school, child care settings, or work.
- There is no specific treatment for rubella. Most people will fully recover without complications.

