

AN IMPORTANT NOTE FROM THE HEALTH OFFICE

Fact Sheet: Scarlet Fever

What is scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is an uncommon infection caused by a type of bacteria called *Streptococcus pyogenes*, also known as group A streptococci. As well as scarlet fever, these bacteria can cause a range of other conditions, including throat infections and tonsillitis, skin infections (impetigo), wound infections, and acute rheumatic fever. The disease most commonly presents in children or adults with a “strep throat” infection or tonsillitis, followed by the development of a skin rash. It is not considered highly contagious and the infection is very treatable with antibiotics. Most children will recover fully within a week or so. Deaths from scarlet fever are now extremely rare.

How is scarlet fever spread?

The bacterium is found in the nose and/or throat of infected persons and can be spread to other people by:

- coughing or sneezing (by breathing in droplets containing the bacterium).
- direct contact with an infected person, where bacteria may be transferred by kissing or on hands.
- sharing food or drink with an infected person.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- sore throat and fever (high temperature) are the typical first symptoms.
- a bright red (scarlet) rash then soon develops. This is caused by a toxin (poison) that is released into the blood stream by the streptococcal bacteria.
 - the rash starts as small red spots, usually on the neck and upper chest. It soon spreads to many other parts of the body and may feel like sandpaper. The rash tends to blanch (go white) if you press on it. The face is usually spared by the rash, but may become quite flushed.
 - the tongue may become pale but coated with red spots ('strawberry tongue'). After a few days the the whole tongue may look red.
 - other common symptoms include: headaches, nausea and vomiting, being off food, and feeling generally unwell.

Infected children should be excluded from child care or school until they are well, and at least 24 hours after starting antibiotic treatment.

How long does it take to develop?

The time between exposure (contact with the sick person) and getting sick is on average **1-3 days**.

How long is it infective?

People with scarlet fever can spread the disease to others until around 24 hours after commencing antibiotic treatment.

Who is at risk?

- anyone can be infected with group A streptococci, but scarlet fever is more likely to occur in young and primary school-aged children.
- people living in the same household.
- people in close contact with an infected person who is coughing or sneezing.

How is scarlet fever diagnosed?

A swab from the back of the throat is usually taken to confirm the diagnosis.

How is scarlet fever treated?

Treatment is important, and consists of a course of antibiotics (usually penicillin) to kill the bacterium and prevent serious complications that are sometimes associated with group A streptococcal infections, including heart (rheumatic fever) and kidney disease.

What you can do?

- paracetamol may be given to reduce high temperature (fever) and to relieve a sore throat
- encourage fluids
- encourage rest
- see your doctor. If your doctor prescribes antibiotics it is important to complete the course.

How can spread of scarlet fever and “strep throat” be prevented?

- cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing
- wash your hands after wiping or blowing your nose, coughing and sneezing
- wash hands before preparing food
- see your doctor if you or your child has symptoms of sore throat and fever
- wash your hands after touching soiled tissues.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact the AAS Health Office or your Health care provider.

Visit website the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at www.cdc.gov