



SCARLET FEVER FACT SHEET

What is scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever, sometimes called scarlatina, is an infection caused by bacteria (Group A streptococci) which affect the throat. These bacteria make a number of toxins (poisons) which cause a rash to appear on the body.

Who gets scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is most common in children and young adults. It is now quite rare in the United Kingdom, although it was once a very serious childhood disease.

How do you get scarlet fever?

The bacteria are carried in saliva in the mouth and mucus from a runny nose. Scarlet fever is spread by touching the mucus or saliva of an infected person, or drinking glasses, plates or utensils they have used, and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes. You can also get the disease by inhaling infected airborne droplets produced by a person with scarlet fever coughing or sneezing in the air near you.

How do you avoid getting scarlet fever?

Wash your hands often and don't share eating utensils. All handkerchiefs and tissues contaminated with mucus from someone with scarlet fever should be washed or disposed of immediately.

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

The first symptoms often include a sore throat, headache, fever, nausea, and vomiting. Between 12 to 48 hours after this, the characteristic rash develops. The rash is usually seen in those aged under 18 years.

Symptoms can also include:

A fine, red rash, like sandpaper to touch, which first appears on the chest and stomach, rapidly spreading to other parts of the body

Fever – over 38.3° C (101° F) or higher is common

White coating on the tongue, which peels a few days later 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

Peeling skin on the finger tips, toes, and groin area, as the rash fades

It usually takes from 1 to 4 days for the symptoms to appear after you come in contact with the bacteria. Scarlet fever usually clears up after a week.

What is the treatment for scarlet fever?

A mild case of scarlet fever will clear up by itself. For more severe cases, a short course of antibiotics will cure the illness and reduce the risk of complications.

If you have a high temperature, drink plenty of fluids and keep cool, but not cold. Paracetamol can be taken to relieve discomfort and bring down temperatures

Are there any complications?

The vast majority of cases of scarlet fever have no complications at all. Very occasionally, one of the following complications can occur:

Early

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

Late

Bone or joint problems
Liver damage
Kidney damage
Acute rheumatic fever (which can damage the heart)
Watch out for any symptoms that might suggest these complications in the first few weeks after the main infection has cleared up.
If you have had scarlet fever you are unlikely to get it again.

Should you stay off work or school?

You should stay away from school or work for 24 hours from the beginning of antibiotic treatment.

Public Health England and scarlet fever

We provide advice on controlling outbreaks. We look for the source of the infection, so that we can help to prevent other people from becoming infected. We also provide advice on screening those who may be affected and provide analysis of samples in our specialist laboratories.

More information about Public Health England and about scarlet fever is available on our website www.gov.uk/phe

PHE East of England

Beacon House, Dunhams Lane, Letchworth Garden City SG6 1BE

Tel: 0300 303 8537 - Fax: 0300 303 8541

Email: smh@phe.gov.uk phe.smh@nhs.net

www.gov.uk/phe

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