

Scarlet Fever Fact Sheet

What is 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 that are responsible for a wide range of disease in humans.

Although it was once a very serious childhood disease, scarlet fever is now usually mild with severe disease now rare in the United Kingdom. The term scarlatina may 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?

The bacteria are carried in the mouth, throat and nose of the infected person, and are spread by a person's mouth, nose or eyes coming into contact with the mucus or saliva of an infected person. Mucus or saliva might be on cups, plates, pens or surfaces such as tables that might have been used or touched by somebody carrying the bacteria. You can also get the disease by inhaling infected airborne droplets produced by a person who is carrying the bacteria through coughing or sneezing.

How do you avoid getting Scarlet Fever?

It is probably very difficult to avoid catching scarlet fever, however washing your hands after using the toilet, before preparing food and before eating food could reduce the chances of you becoming infected. Not sharing eating and drinking utensils with somebody who has scarlet fever, cold like symptoms or a sore throat before those utensils have been washed will also help to reduce your chances of becoming infected. All handkerchiefs and tissues from someone who is infected should be washed or disposed of immediately and the individual concerned should wash their hands often to remove mucus, saliva and bacteria from them.

What are the symptoms of Scarlet Fever, how long do they take to 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 first appears 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. Fever - over 38.3° C (101° F) 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. The flushed face may appear more 'sunburnt' on darker skin.
- Peeling skin 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.

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. Paracetamol can be taken to reduce temperature and relieve discomfort.

Are there any complications?

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

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

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

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

Patients (or their parents) should keep an eye out for any symptoms that might suggest these complications in the first few weeks after the main infection has cleared up and seek medical attention immediately if concerned.

Should you stay away from work/school?

You should stay away from school or work for five days from the beginning of antibiotic treatment.

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