

Rubella (German Measles)

Information for the Public



What is rubella?

Rubella, sometimes called “German measles,” is a disease caused by a virus. The infection is usually mild with fever and a rash. But, if a pregnant woman gets infected, the virus can cause serious birth defects.

What are the symptoms of rubella?

In children, rubella usually causes the following symptoms that last 2 or 3 days:

- Rash that starts on the face and spreads to the rest of the body
- Low fever (less than 101 degrees)

Before the rash appears, older children and adults may also have:

- Swollen glands
- Cold-like symptoms
- Aching joints (especially in young women)

Most adults who get rubella usually have a mild illness, with low-grade fever, sore throat, and a rash that starts on the face and spreads to the rest of the body.

Some adults may also have a headache, pink eye, and general discomfort before the rash appears.

About 25 to 50% of people infected with rubella will not experience any symptoms.

How serious is rubella?

Rubella is usually mild in children. Complications are not common, but they occur more often in adults. In rare cases, rubella can cause serious problems, including brain infections and bleeding problems.

Rubella is most dangerous for a pregnant woman’s unborn baby. Infection during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, or birth defects like deafness, blindness, intellectual disability, and heart defects. As many as 85 out of 100 babies born to mothers who had rubella in the first 3 months of pregnancy will have a birth defect.

How does rubella spread?

Rubella spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

The disease is most contagious when the infected person has a rash. But it can spread up to 7 days before the rash appears. People without symptoms can still spread rubella.

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Can rubella be treated?

There is no specific medicine to treat rubella or make the disease go away faster. In many cases, symptoms are mild. For others, mild symptoms can be managed with bed rest and medicines for fever, such as acetaminophen.

If you are concerned about your symptoms or your child's symptoms, contact your doctor.

Can rubella be prevented?

Rubella can be prevented with MMR vaccine. This protects against three diseases: measles, mumps, and rubella. CDC recommends children get two doses of MMR vaccine, starting with the first dose at 12 through 15 months of age, and the second dose at 4 through 6 years of age. Teens and adults should also be up to date on their MMR vaccination.

Children may also get the MMRV vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella (chickenpox). This vaccine is only licensed for use in children who are 12 months through 12 years of age.