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Rubella

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What is Rubella?

Rubella, also known as German measles, is a highly infectious illness caused by a virus called rubella. It is usually a mild illness, but if a pregnant woman catches rubella, it can cause serious health complications for her unborn baby.

How do I catch it?

Rubella spreads when someone with the virus coughs or sneezes and you breathe in their infected respiratory droplets.

Where is it?

Rubella is found throughout the world, but is less common in wealthy countries with good healthcare systems and childhood vaccination programmes.

What is my risk?

If you have been given the vaccine or are naturally protected (immune) after having the illness, your risk is low.

If you have never had the vaccine (and have not had a blood test to check your immunity) you are at risk.

If you are pregnant and you catch rubella, you could [miscarry](#) (lose your baby before birth), your baby may be [stillborn](#) or born with birth defects known as [congenital rubella syndrome](#). These defects can be very serious and include brain damage, deafness, heart problems and eye conditions like [cataracts](#). Your baby may also develop [diabetes](#) and thyroid problems when they are older.

What are the symptoms?

- A pink, spotty rash, which can be itchy.
- Coughs, sneezes and a runny nose.
- Fever, tiredness and aching muscles.
- Poor appetite.
- Sore, red sticky eyes ([conjunctivitis](#)).

After you catch rubella, it takes 14 to 21 days for the virus to become established and for symptoms to appear. The disease lasts seven to ten days.

Can it be treated?

There is no specific drug or medicine to treat rubella, but it is usually a mild illness. You can take pain relief like paracetamol and you should rest and drink plenty of fluids. As rubella is a virus, antibiotics will not help, so your doctor will only prescribe them if you develop a bacterial infection as well.

Is there a vaccine?

Yes, in the UK there is a combined vaccine which protects against [measles](#), [mumps](#), and [rubella](#). It is called [MMR](#) and is given to children as part of their routine vaccines. It is also offered to all young girls and non-immune women of childbearing age **BEFORE PREGNANCY** to protect any future babies from the serious effects of rubella, including congenital rubella syndrome. The vaccine contains live virus, so can never be given to pregnant women or anyone whose immune system is not working properly.

If you were born before 1970 you probably had rubella (the illness) and may have natural immunity. If you think you never had the illness or the vaccine, ask your GP for advice about the MMR vaccine or a blood test to check your immunity.

How can I prevent it?

Reduce your risk by having the vaccine.

Links

[NHS Choices: Rubella.](#)

[World Health Organization: Rubella and Congenital Rubella Syndrome.](#)