

Rubella (German measles)

Rubella is a contagious disease caused by a virus. Symptoms can be similar to a mild cold or the flu, and include fever, runny nose, sore throat and rash. Rubella can cause serious problems for unborn babies whose mothers become infected during pregnancy. Getting vaccinated against rubella is the best way to protect yourself and avoid spreading the disease. The rubella vaccine is free for some people in NSW.

What is rubella?

Rubella, also known as German measles, is an infectious viral disease that causes a skin rash, sore throat, joint pain and other symptoms. Rubella is mild for most people, but it can cause serious birth defects or miscarriage in pregnancy.

What are the symptoms?

Rubella symptoms can last between 1 to 5 days. Common symptoms include:

- Mild fever
- Rash (typically starting on the face that spreads to the rest of the body)
- Headache
- Runny nose
- Conjunctivitis (redness or swelling of the white of the eye)
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Aching joints, especially in women.

Some people, including children, may have few or no symptoms. In rare cases, rubella can cause easy bruising or bleeding anywhere by lowering of the platelet count or inflammation of the brain (encephalitis).

People with symptoms should visit their doctor right away to get tested.

How is it spread?

Rubella can spread from an infected person by droplets from the nose or mouth or from mother to

unborn baby. Rubella is easily spread to people who have not been vaccinated or previously infected.

Symptoms start usually between 14 to 21 days after exposure. People with rubella are usually infectious from seven days before the rash starts until seven days after the rash has gone. To stop the spread, people with rubella should stay at home during this period.

Who is most at risk?

The following groups are most at risk if they have not been vaccinated or previously infected (as they are not immune):

- Pregnant women and their unborn babies
- Childcare and healthcare workers
- Travellers to countries with low rubella vaccination rates

How can pregnant people stay safe?

A pregnant woman can spread rubella to her unborn baby.

Congenital rubella syndrome happens to 90 per cent of babies born to women who are infected with rubella during the first ten weeks of their pregnancy.

It can cause stillbirth, miscarriage or birth defects including heart defects, deafness and eye problems.

To stay safe, women planning a pregnancy should:

- visit their doctor to have a blood test to check that they are protected against rubella.
- avoid getting pregnant for one month following the vaccine.

Pregnant women should:

- not have a rubella containing live vaccine
- call their doctor for advice if they have come into contact with a case of rubella.

Is there a vaccine available?

Getting vaccinated with a rubella containing vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and avoid spreading the disease. Rubella containing vaccines are safe and effective and have been used worldwide for many years.

In NSW, the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and the MMRV vaccine (which also protects against varicella or chickenpox) are free for some people as part of the Immunisation Schedule.

- Children should get the MMR vaccine at 12 months and the MMRV vaccine at 18 months.
- People born in or after 1966 who have not had two doses of rubella containing vaccine can get the MMR vaccine for free through their doctor. Men are less likely to be immune as they were not included in school vaccination programs between 1971 and 1993.
- People who are unsure if they have had two doses in the past can safely have another dose and should speak with their doctor about this.

How is it diagnosed?

A blood test can diagnose rubella. However, rubella can be difficult to diagnose because there are many other viruses that cause similar symptoms.

How is it treated?

There are no specific medicines for rubella. Strategies to try and relieve your symptoms at home include:

- getting plenty of rest
- drinking lots of fluids

Most cases of rubella get better on their own. If you or your child have severe symptoms or are concerned, see your doctor or call healthdirect on 1800 022 222.

If you have rubella and have been in contact with a pregnant woman, tell them to speak to their doctor for advice.

What is the public health response?

Rubella is notifiable by laboratories in NSW under the Public Health Act. Statistics on the number of cases are tracked to monitor the impact of the immunisation program, and to identify outbreaks.