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Scarlet fever

Scarlet fever is a contagious infection that mostly affects young children. It's easily treated with antibiotics.

Check if you have scarlet fever

The first signs of scarlet fever can be flu-like symptoms such as:

- [high temperature](#) (38 degrees Celsius or higher)
- [sore throat](#)
- swollen neck glands (a large lump on the side of your neck)

Most people with a high temperature or a sore throat have another virus and not scarlet fever.

A rash appears 12 to 48 hours later. It looks like small, raised bumps. It starts on the chest and tummy, then spreads. The rash makes your skin feel rough, like sandpaper.



On white skin the rash looks pink or red. It may be harder to see on brown and black skin, but you can still feel it.



A white coating also appears on the tongue. This peels, leaving the tongue red, swollen and covered in little bumps (called "strawberry tongue").



The rash does not appear on the face, but the cheeks can look red. The redness may be harder to see on brown and black skin.

The symptoms are the same for children and adults, although scarlet fever is less common in adults.

See a GP if you or your child:

- have scarlet fever symptoms
- have scarlet fever and [chickenpox](#) at the same time
- are ill again, weeks after scarlet fever got better – this can be a sign of a complication, such as rheumatic fever
- are feeling unwell and have been in contact with someone who has scarlet fever

Scarlet fever is very easily spread. Check with a GP before you go in. They may suggest a phone consultation.

What happens at your appointment

GPs can often diagnose scarlet fever by looking at your tongue and rash.

Sometimes they may:

- wipe a cotton bud around the back of your throat to test for bacteria

- arrange a blood test

If it's scarlet fever

If you or your child has scarlet fever, stay at home until all of these apply:


- You no longer have a high temperature.
- You don't have any other symptoms.
- It's been 24 hours since your first dose of antibiotics.

Treating scarlet fever

Your GP will prescribe [antibiotics](#).

These will:

- help you get better quicker
- reduce the chance of a serious illnesses, such as [pneumonia](#)
- make it less likely that you'll pass the infection on to someone else



Contact your GP if you or your child are showing no signs of improvement after taking antibiotics.

Taking antibiotics

Keep taking the antibiotics until they're finished, even if you feel better.

This will reduce the chance of the infection returning.

Things you can do yourself

You can relieve symptoms of scarlet fever by:

- drinking cool fluids
- eating soft foods if you have a sore throat
- taking painkillers like [paracetamol](#) to bring down a high temperature (do not give aspirin to children under 16)

How long scarlet fever lasts

Scarlet fever lasts for around 1 week.

You can spread scarlet fever to other people up to 6 days before you get symptoms until 24 hours after

you take your 1st dose of antibiotics.

If you do not take antibiotics, you can spread the infection for 2 to 3 weeks after your symptoms start.

Risks and complications of scarlet fever

Scarlet fever can be a serious illness. But thanks to antibiotics, it's less common than it used to be and easier to treat.

Complications from scarlet fever are rare.

They can happen during or in the weeks after the infection, and can include:

- [ear infection](#)
- [sepsis - know the signs of sepsis](#)
- [strep A](#)
- throat abscess
- [sinusitis](#)
- [pneumonia](#)
- [meningitis](#)
- rheumatic fever

Pregnancy advice

There's no evidence to suggest that getting scarlet fever during pregnancy will harm your baby.

But it can make you feel unwell, so it's best to avoid close contact with anyone who has it.

Contact a GP if you get symptoms.

Many of the antibiotics used for scarlet fever are safe to take during pregnancy.

How to avoid spreading scarlet fever

Scarlet fever is very infectious and can easily spread to other people.

To reduce the chance of spreading scarlet fever:

Do

- ✓ wash your hands often with soap and water
- ✓ use tissues to trap germs from coughs or sneezes

- ✓ bin used tissues as quickly as possible
- ✓ complete your course of antibiotics if prescribed, even if you feel better. This reduces the chance of the infection returning

Don't

- ✗ do not go to work, school, creche or socialise with other people if you are ill
- ✗ do not share cutlery, cups, towels, clothes, bedding or baths with anyone who has symptoms of scarlet fever

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