

Rubella (German Measles)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is rubella?

Rubella, also called German measles, is a contagious disease caused by a virus. Although rubella is usually a mild illness, it can be very dangerous during pregnancy because it can cause serious birth defects in a developing baby. Before the rubella vaccine became available, it was a common childhood illness. Rubella is caused by a different virus than measles.

Who gets rubella?

Anyone who has not had rubella or has not been vaccinated against it can become infected. Although rubella is now uncommon in the United States because of vaccination, cases still occur in other parts of the world where vaccination rates are lower.

How do people get rubella?

Rubella spreads from person to person through the air. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, the virus can enter another person's body through the nose or throat.

People with rubella can spread the virus from about seven days before the rash appears until about seven days after the rash begins.

What are the symptoms of rubella?

Rubella symptoms are often mild, and up to half of infected people may have no symptoms at all while still being able to spread the virus.

Symptoms may include:

- Low-grade fever
- Headache
- Mild pink eye (redness or swelling of the eye)
- General discomfort or fatigue
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Cough
- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- A rash that usually begins on the face and spreads to the rest of the body

Are there complications from rubella infection?

Rubella is usually mild, but complications can occur. Up to 70% of adult women with rubella may develop arthritis. In rare cases, rubella can cause serious complications such as brain infections or bleeding problems.

The greatest risk from rubella is during pregnancy. If a pregnant person becomes infected, the virus can pass to the developing baby and cause:

- Miscarriage
- Stillbirth
- Serious birth defects

These birth defects may include:

- Heart defects
- Hearing loss
- Vision problems
- Intellectual disabilities
- Liver or spleen damage

This condition is called congenital rubella syndrome (CRS).

People who are pregnant or planning pregnancy should talk with their health care provider about rubella immunity. A blood test can determine whether a person is protected through prior infection or vaccination.

How is rubella diagnosed?

A health care provider may suspect rubella based on symptoms, recent exposures, and vaccination history. Laboratory testing is used to confirm infection.

What is the treatment for rubella?

There is no specific cure for rubella. Treatment focuses on relieving symptoms and may include:

- Rest
- Fluids
- Medicines to reduce fever or discomfort

Most people recover on their own without complications.

How can rubella be prevented?

Rubella is a vaccine-preventable disease. Vaccination is the best way to protect against rubella infection. The rubella vaccine is given in combination with measles and mumps vaccines as the MMR vaccine (measles, mumps, and rubella).

The routine schedule includes:

- First dose at 12–15 months of age
- Second dose at 4–6 years of age

Vaccination also helps protect pregnant people and developing babies from congenital rubella syndrome (CRS).

Where can I get more information on rubella?

- Health care providers
- Local health departments: localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health: nj.gov/health
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases: nfid.org/infectious-disease/rubella/

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.