

Rubella

What is rubella?

Rubella, also known as German measles, is an infectious disease caused by the rubella virus. Rubella is not very common in Australia due to high levels of immunisation.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of rubella may include mild fever, rash, runny nose, conjunctivitis, swollen lymph glands and sore joints.

In rare cases, rubella infection can be complicated by lowering of the platelet count (thrombocytopenia) which can cause bleeding, or by encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Rubella infection in a woman during early pregnancy may cause miscarriage and severe birth defects in the infant, including heart defects, deafness, brain damage, and eye problems (including cataracts). The risk is highest during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy and rare after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

How is rubella spread?

Rubella is spread through contact with respiratory droplets or direct contact with an infected person.

It is important that a person infected with rubella avoid contact with others to reduce the risk of spreading the disease. They should be excluded from school, childcare or work until they are no longer infectious.

How long does a person remain infectious?

A person with rubella can be infectious in the 7 days before and for 4 days after the rash begins.

Who is most at risk from rubella?

Anyone who comes into contact with the virus can get rubella, unless they have immunity from past infection or from vaccination.

Although the infection is mild for most people, rubella infection early in pregnancy can cause serious birth defects and miscarriage. Women planning a pregnancy should have a blood test to check their immunity against rubella before falling pregnant.

What if I have been in contact with someone with rubella?

Symptoms usually develop between 14 to 21 days after coming into contact with the rubella virus. Anyone with suspected rubella should see their doctor. Pregnant women who have come into contact with rubella should see their doctor for advice.

How is it diagnosed?

It is difficult to diagnose rubella based on the person's symptoms alone. If your doctor suspects you may have rubella, a blood test, swab from the throat, or a urine specimen can confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment for rubella. People with rubella should see their doctor for advice on how to manage their symptoms. They should also drink plenty of fluids and rest.

Immunisation recommendations

Vaccination is the best way to prevent being infected with rubella. A measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine is funded under the National Immunisation Program. This vaccine is offered to all children at 12 months of age and then again in combination with the chickenpox vaccine (MMRV) at 18 months of age. To be fully vaccinated, people need to receive two doses of a mumps containing vaccine at least four weeks apart.

How do I know if I have been vaccinated or if I am immune to rubella?

If you were born prior to 1966 in Australia, it is likely that you had a natural rubella infection in your childhood and are now immune. If you were born during or after 1966, and have not had rubella infection, you should have received two doses of a rubella containing vaccine at least four weeks apart to be considered immune. If you are unsure whether you are immune, speak with your doctor about getting vaccinated. It is safe to have the vaccine more than twice.

Women planning a pregnancy should have a blood test to check their immunity against rubella before falling pregnant. If not immune, at least one dose of a MMR vaccine is recommended. Although two doses of MMR vaccine are routinely recommended, women who show immunity after one dose do not need another dose. Women should avoid pregnancy for 28 days after vaccination.

Are there any side effects from the vaccination?

Side effects from the MMR and MMRV vaccines are usually mild and temporary. They may include fever, tiredness, faint red rash (not infectious), localised swelling at the injection site, swollen glands and feeling unwell. These vaccines are not recommended for people who are immune-suppressed or for pregnant women. Pregnancy should be avoided for 28 days following vaccination. MMR or MMRV vaccination may also need to be delayed if you have had a recent blood transfusion or blood product.

Need more information?

For more information about rubella contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Rubella is a notifiable disease. Cases notified to ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers.

Acknowledgements

1. Heymann DL. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. 20th edn. Washington: American Public Health Association, USA; 2015.
2. Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). *Australian Immunisation Handbook*, Australian Government Department of Health, Canberra, 2018. Available from: <https://immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au>

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