

Rubella (German measles)

Rubella is caused by infection with a virus. Infection is usually mild, but can cause serious damage to unborn babies. Immunisation is recommended for all children at 12 months and 18 months of age. All women planning pregnancy should check their immunity

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What is rubella?

- Rubella (or German measles) is an infectious viral disease of humans.
- Although in most people infection is mild, infection in early pregnancy can cause serious birth defects or miscarriage.

What is congenital rubella syndrome?

- Congenital rubella syndrome occurs in up to 90 per cent of babies born to women who are infected with rubella during the first ten weeks of their pregnancy.
- Congenital rubella syndrome can cause a miscarriage or birth defects including heart defects, deafness, brain damage, and eye problems including cataracts.

What are the symptoms?

- The symptoms of rubella may include a mild fever, rash, runny nose, conjunctivitis and often swollen lymph nodes. Aching joints are also common, especially in women.
- 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).

How is it spread?

- Rubella is spread from an infected person by droplets from the nose or mouth or by direct contact. Rubella is easily spread to people who have not been vaccinated or previously infected.
- The time from exposure to onset of illness is usually 14 to 21 days. People with rubella are usually infectious from seven days before the rash occurs until four days later.

Who is at risk?

Anybody who is not immune (either from past infection or vaccination) is at risk of rubella.

How is it prevented?

- People with rubella should stay at home for at least four days after onset of rash, and avoid contact with non-immune people.
- The best protection against rubella is through vaccination with a rubella containing vaccine. In NSW this is provided as part of the Immunisation Schedule as MMR which protects against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), and MMRV which also protects against varicella (chickenpox).
- MMR vaccine should be given to children when they are 12 months and MMRV at 18 months of age.

- Rubella containing vaccines are a safe and effective and have been used worldwide for many years.
- While many older adults are immune to rubella because they have been vaccinated or infected as children, young adults (especially men) may not be immunised. Vaccination against rubella is very important for women (and men) of child bearing age to reduce the chance of pregnant women coming into contact with, and contracting, rubella infection.
- People born during or after 1966 who have not received two doses of rubella containing vaccine can access free MMR vaccine through their GP. People who are unsure if they have received two doses of a rubella containing vaccine in the past can safely be given another dose.
- It is very important for all women planning a pregnancy, to know whether they are immune to rubella. Women planning a pregnancy should have a blood test, which can be done by their local doctor, to check that they are protected against rubella. **A Rubella containing vaccine should not be given to pregnant women, and pregnancy should be avoided for one month following vaccination.**

How is it diagnosed?

Rubella can be difficult to diagnose because there are many other viruses that cause similar illnesses with a fever and a rash. Definite diagnosis requires a blood test.

How is it treated?

Treatment for symptoms of rubella include, rest and plenty of fluids.

What is the public health response?

Pregnant women who have come in contact with a case of rubella should call their doctor for advice. 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.

For further information please call your local public health unit on 1300 066 055 or visit the New South Wales Health website www.health.nsw.gov.au