

Scarlet Fever Information Sheet

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What is it?

Scarlet fever is an illness caused by streptococcus A bacteria (more commonly known as strep). The illness affects some people who have strep throat or skin infection caused by this bacteria. The strep bacteria produces poisons (toxins) which give the skin a red rash. It is usually a mild illness, but people with scarlet fever need treatment to prevent serious health problems.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms usually start 1-3 days after contact with the bacteria.

The illness usually begins with fever and a sore throat. There may also be vomiting and tummy pain.

The rash usually starts 1-2 days after the illness begins. It may first appear on the neck, underarms, and groin, then spread over the body. Usually the rash starts as small flat red blotches that gradually become small bumps with a rough surface. A child often gets a pink or red face, with a pale area around their mouth. Their tongue may get a white coating with red spots, often called "strawberry tongue." Once this coating comes off the tongue is bright red.

The scarlet fever rash usually fades in 7 days, and there is usually some skin peeling as the rash fades.

In summary, symptoms can include

- Rash (as described above)
- Fever
- Sore throat
- Nausea and vomiting
- Peeling of the skin (tips of fingers and toes)



Scarlet fever rash and tongue appearance. – known as strawberry tongue. Photos via Wikimedia Commons

How serious is it?

Scarlet fever is usually a mild illness, but needs antibiotic treatment to stop serious complications such as kidney problems or Rheumatic Fever (which can affect the heart).

Who is most at risk?

Scarlet fever usually affects children under the age of 10 years, however anyone can get it.

How could I get infected?

- By breathing in droplets from an infected person that are coughed or sneezed into the air
- Through touching contaminated hands or food, or things used by an infected person, such as cups, plates, and eating utensils.

How do I protect myself and others?

The best protection is good hand washing. It is especially important for anyone with a sore throat to wash his or her hands often. Avoid sharing towels, eating utensils such as spoons, forks, knives, plates and cups, or other personal items. There is no vaccine to prevent scarlet fever.

Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?

People with scarlet fever should stay home from school, preschool or work for at least 24 hours after starting antibiotics.

How is it treated?

- Antibiotics are used to treat the bacteria that cause scarlet fever
- Rest and extra water or other fluids are a good idea

Where can I get further information?

For further information on scarlet fever please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.