

Scarlet fever



What is Scarlet Fever?

Scarlet fever is a bacterial illness that causes a distinctive pink-red rash. Scarlet fever is also known as scarlatina, although this often refers to a milder form of the disease. It can follow a **sore throat** or a skin infection (**impetigo**) caused by particular strains of streptococcus bacteria.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of scarlet fever generally take two to five days to appear after infection.

The illness often starts with

- **Sore throat**
- **Headache**
- High temperature (fever)
- **Swollen neck glands**
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea or vomiting
- Red lines in the folds of the body, such as the armpit, which may last a couple of days after the rash has gone
- A white coating on the tongue, which peels a few days later leaving the tongue red and swollen (this is known as strawberry tongue)
- A general feeling of being unwell
- Rash developing 12 to 48 hours later
 - Red blotches are the first sign of the rash. These turn into a fine pink-red rash that feels like sandpaper to touch and looks like sunburn.
 - This usually starts in one place, but soon spreads to other parts of the body. It commonly affects the ears, neck, chest, elbows, and inner thighs and groin, and may be itchy. The rash does not normally spread to the face however, the cheeks become flushed and the area just around the mouth stays quite pale. The rash will turn white a glass is pressed against it.
 - The rash usually fades after about a week, but the outer layers of skin, usually on the hands and feet, may peel for several weeks afterwards.

In milder cases (scarlatina), the rash may be the only symptom.

Are there any complications?

Most cases of scarlet fever cause no complications especially if the condition is properly treated. In the early stages there is a small risk of:

- **Ear infection**

- Throat **abscess** (painful collection of pus)
- **Sinusitis** (inflammation of the sinuses)
- **Pneumonia** (inflammation of the lungs)
- **Meningitis** (inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord)

Is it Infectious?

Yes, scarlet fever is extremely contagious.

What is the incubation period?

Symptoms of scarlet fever usually develop two to five days after infection, although individuals will be contagious before showing signs of the illness.

What is the treatment?

Scarlet fever used to be a very serious disease but treatment with antibiotics means that most cases today are mild. With proper treatment, serious complications from scarlet fever are very unlikely however, there is a small risk of the infection spreading to other parts of the body such as the ear, sinuses and lungs. Most individuals with scarlet fever feel better after about a week even without treatment but as antibiotics reduce the length of time that an individual is contagious, speeds up recovery and reduces the risk of **complications from scarlet fever**, then treatment is still recommended.

The symptoms of scarlet fever may be relieved by:

- Drinking plenty of cool fluids or eating soft foods (if the individual has a sore throat)
- Taking paracetamol to bring down a high temperature
- Using calamine lotion or **antihistamine** tablets to relieve itching

How can spread be prevented?

Spread is by the respiratory route so good respiratory hygiene should be practiced as standard in the school.

- Good respiratory hygiene should be encouraged (covering noses and mouths with disposable tissues when coughing or sneezing and discarding it after use).
- Good hand hygiene should also be encouraged (after using the toilet and before eating as per usual but also after coughing, sneezing or assisting others with respiratory hygiene).
- Encourage parents to seek medical review and antibiotic treatment
- Individuals with scarlet fever should be excluded from school until they have been on a course of antibiotics for at least 24 hours. Individuals who do not take antibiotic treatment will be infectious for two to three weeks.
- Avoid sharing contaminated eating utensils, cups and glasses, clothes, baths, bed linen or towels.
- Avoid touching any open or weeping wounds (streptococcal skin infections such as impetigo are caused by the same bacteria as scarlet fever).

- Ensure the health protection team are notified if there is an outbreak or if chicken pox is circulating in the school at the same time.

Can individuals catch scarlet fever more than once?

It is possible to catch scarlet fever more than once, although this is rare.

More information on scarlet fever can be found in chapter nine of the [Health protection in schools and childcare facilities](#) guidance.