UK Health Security Agency

Scarlet Fever Factsheet

What is scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is an infectious disease caused by bacteria called Group A Streptococcus (GAS) that live in the throat, nose and mouth, or on the skin. Anyone can get scarlet fever but it's most common in children.

Scarlet fever is easily treated with antibiotics. It can be a serious illness if not treated. Spotting symptoms early and getting medical advice and treatment is important.

How scarlet fever spreads

Scarlet fever spreads easily through:

- coughing or sneezing
- touching a surface and then touching the mouth or nose
- broken skin, cuts or sores

Symptoms of scarlet fever

The first signs of scarlet fever can include:

- flu like symptoms
- headache
- a sore throat
- swollen neck glands (lumps on neck)
- a high temperature
- feeling sick or being sick
- diarrhoea (loose, watery poo)

The rash

A rash appears 12 to 48 hours after the first symptoms

The rash will:

- look like small, raised bumps
- start on the chest and tummy then spreads
- feel rough, like sandpaper
- look pink or red on white skin
- be harder to see on brown and black skin but will still feel rough

Changes to the tongue

- a white coating will also appear on the tongue
- it might look red and bumpy (strawberry tongue)

When to get medical advice

Scarlet fever is treatable with antibiotics. Some people can get seriously ill. **This is more likely if they have chickenpox or flu at, or around, the same time as scarlet fever.** It's important to trust your instincts if you or your child is unwell.

Contact your GP or call 111 if:

- you, or anyone in your family have symptoms of scarlet fever or a skin infection
- you or your child does not get better in a week (after seeing a GP)
- you or your child has both scarlet fever and **chickenpox or flu** at the same time
- you or your child is feeding or eating much less than normal
- your child has fewer wet nappies than usual or is peeing less than usual, or shows other signs of dehydration
- your baby is under 3 months and has a temperature of 38C, or is 3 to 6 months and has a temperature of 39C or higher
- you or your child has a very high or low temperature, feels hot or cold to the touch, or is shivering
- your child is very tired or irritable

Check symptoms on 111 online (https://111.nhs.uk/triage/check-your-symptoms) (for children aged 5 and over) or call 111 (for children under 5).

Check with the GP before you go in. They may suggest a phone appointment.

Call 999 or go to A&E if:

- your child is having difficulty breathing – they may make grunting noises, be breathing very quickly, or you may notice their tummy sucking under their ribs
- there are pauses when your child breathes
- your child's skin, tongue or lips are blue or grey – on black or brown skin this may be easier to see on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet
- your child is floppy and will not wake up or stay awake

How to stop the spread of scarlet fever

- stay at home, away from nursery, school or work for at least 24 hours after starting the antibiotic treatment. You or your child can return when you no longer have a fever and feel well enough to do so
- wash your hands often with soap and water
- do not share cups or cutlery
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- put used tissues in the bin straight away
- keep cuts and broken skin covered with a waterproof plaster

Treatment

Scarlet fever is treated with antibiotics. It is important to finish the full course, even if you or your child feel better. You can still spread scarlet fever until 24 hours after the first antibiotic dose.

Without antibiotics, the infection can spread for 2 to 3 weeks after your symptoms started.

To feel better:

- drink plenty of water
- rest
- eat soft foods if your throat is sore
- take paracetamol to help pain or fever (never give aspirin to children under 16 years old)
- use calamine lotion or antihistamines if the skin is itchy

Further advice

For further information, including images of the rash on different skin types, see: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/scarlet-fever/

