

## Scarlet fever symptoms

Scarlet fever usually follows a [sore throat](#) or a skin infection, such as [impetigo](#), caused by particular strains of streptococcus bacteria.

Initial symptoms usually include a sore throat, headache and a high temperature (38.3C/101F or above), flushed cheeks and a swollen tongue.

A day or two later the characteristic pinkish rash appears. It usually occurs on the chest and stomach before spreading to other areas of the body, such as the ears and neck.

The [symptoms of scarlet fever](#) usually develop two to five days after infection, although the incubation period (the period between exposure to the infection and symptoms appearing) can be as short as one day or as long as seven days.

The rash feels like sandpaper to touch and it may be itchy. On darker skin the rash may be more difficult to see although its rough texture should be apparent.

## When to seek medical advice

Scarlet fever usually clears up after about a week, but if you think you or your child may have it, see your GP for a proper diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

Your GP should be able to diagnose scarlet fever by examining the distinctive rash and asking about other symptoms. They may also decide to take a sample of saliva from the back of the throat so it can be tested in a laboratory to confirm the diagnosis.

There's no evidence to suggest that catching scarlet fever when pregnant will put your baby at risk. However, if you're heavily pregnant, tell the doctors and midwives in charge of your care if you've been in contact with someone who has scarlet fever.

## How scarlet fever spreads

Scarlet fever is very contagious and can be caught by:

- breathing in bacteria in airborne droplets from an infected person's coughs and sneezes
- touching the skin of a person with a streptococcal skin infection, such as impetigo
- sharing contaminated towels, baths, clothes or bed linen

It can also be caught from carriers – people who have the bacteria in their throat or on their skin but don't have any symptoms.

## Who's affected by scarlet fever

Most cases (about 80%) of scarlet fever occur in children under 10 (usually between two and eight years of age). However, people of any age can get the illness.

As it's so contagious, scarlet fever is likely to affect someone in close contact with a person with a sore throat or skin infection caused by streptococcus bacteria. Outbreaks often occur in nurseries and schools where children are in close contact with one another.

The symptoms of scarlet fever will only develop in people susceptible to toxins produced by the streptococcus bacteria. Most children over 10 years of age will have developed immunity to these toxins.

It's possible to catch scarlet fever more than once, but this is rare.

## Treating scarlet fever

Scarlet fever used to be a very serious illness, but nowadays most cases tend to be mild.

It can easily be treated with antibiotics. Liquid antibiotics, such as penicillin or amoxicillin, are often used to treat children. These must be taken for 10 days, even though most people recover after four to five days.

It's important to be aware that your child will still be infectious for 24 hours after antibiotic treatment has begun, and therefore they shouldn't attend nursery or school during this period (see below).

Without antibiotic treatment, your child will be infectious for 1-2 weeks after symptoms appear.