

Scarlet Fever

Not as common as it once was, scarlet fever – scarlatina – is a bacterial infection caused by group A Streptococcus or “group A strep.” This illness affects a small percentage of people who have strep throat or, less commonly, streptococcal (type of bacterial) skin infections. Scarlet fever is treatable with antibiotics and usually is a mild illness, but it needs to be treated to prevent rare but serious complications.

Although anyone can get scarlet fever, it usually affects children between 5 and 18 years of age. The classic symptom of the disease is not the fever, but a certain type of red rash that feels rough, like sandpaper.

How Do You Get Scarlet Fever?

Common Symptoms of Scarlet Fever

- A very red, sore throat
- A fever (101° F or above)
- A red rash with a sandpaper feel
- Bright red underarm, elbow and groin skin creases
- A whitish coating on the tongue or back of the throat
- A “strawberry” tongue
- Headache
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Swollen glands
- Body aches

Group A strep bacteria live in a person’s nose and throat. The bacteria are spread through contact with droplets from an infected person’s cough or sneeze. If you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes after touching something that has these droplets on it, you may become ill. If you drink from the same glass or eat from the same plate as the sick person, you could also become ill. It is possible to get scarlet fever from contact with sores from group A strep skin infections.

Scarlet Fever: What To Expect

Illness usually begins with a fever and sore throat. There also may be chills, vomiting, and abdominal pain. The tongue may have a whitish coating and appear swollen. It may also have a “strawberry”-like (red and bumpy) appearance. The throat and tonsils may be very red and sore, and swallowing may be painful.

One or two days after the illness begins, the characteristic red rash appears (although the rash can appear before illness to as many as 7 days later). Certain strep bacteria produce a toxin (poison) which causes some people to break out in the rash—the “scarlet” of scarlet fever. The rash may first appear on the neck and chest, then spread over the body. Typically, the rash begins as small, flat red blotches which gradually become fine bumps and feel like sandpaper.

Although the cheeks might have a flushed appearance, there may be a pale area around the mouth. Underarm, elbow and groin skin creases may become brighter red than the rest of the rash. These are called Pastia's lines. The scarlet fever rash generally fades in about 7 days. As the rash fades, the skin may peel around the finger tips, toes, and groin area. This peeling can last up to several weeks.

Scarlet fever is treatable with antibiotics. Since either viruses or other bacteria can also cause sore throats, it's important to ask the doctor about a strep test (a simple swab of the throat) if your child complains of having a sore throat. If the test is positive, meaning your child is infected with group A strep bacteria, your child's doctor will prescribe antibiotics to avoid possible, although rare, complications.

Complications from Scarlet Fever

Complications from scarlet fever can be prevented by treatment with antibiotics. These complications may include:

- Rheumatic fever
- Kidney disease (inflammation of the kidneys, called poststreptococcal glomerulonephritis)
- Ear infections (otitis media)
- Skin infections
- Abscesses of the throat
- Pneumonia
- Arthritis

Preventing Infection: Wash Those Hands

The best way to keep from getting infected is to wash your hands often and avoid sharing eating utensils, linens, towels or other personal items. It is especially important for anyone with a sore throat to wash his or her hands often. There is no vaccine to prevent strep throat or scarlet fever.