Fact Sheet

Rubella

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What is Rubella?

Rubella, also called German measles or three-day measles, is a contagious viral infection best known by its distinctive red rash.

Rubella is not the same as measles (rubeola), though the two illnesses do share some characteristics, including the red rash. However, rubella is caused by a different virus than measles and is neither as infectious nor usually as severe as measles.

Rubella can be prevented by the MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella) vaccine. Doctors recommend that children get two doses of the MMR vaccine for best protection.

- **The first dose at 12 to 15 months of age**
- **The second dose at 4 to 6 years of age**

Spread of Disease

Rubella is a virus that is passed from person to person. It can spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes or it can spread by direct contact with an infected person's respiratory secretions, such as mucus. It can also be transmitted from a pregnant woman to her unborn child via the bloodstream. A person with rubella is contagious 7 days before the onset of the rash until 5-7 days after the rash appears. An infected person can spread the illness before the person realizes he or she has it.

Rubella is rare in the United States because most children receive a vaccination against the infection at an early age. However, cases of rubella do occur, mostly in unvaccinated foreign-born adults.

The disease is still common in many parts of the world. The prevalence of rubella in other countries is something to consider before going abroad, especially if you're pregnant.

Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of rubella are often so mild that they're difficult to notice, especially in children. If signs and symptoms do occur, they generally appear between 12 to 23 days after exposure to virus. They typically last about two to three days and may include:

- Mild fever of 102 F (38.9 C) or lower
- Headache
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Inflamed, red eyes
- Enlarged, tender lymph nodes at the base of the skull, the back of the neck and behind the ears
- A fine, pink rash that begins on the face and quickly spreads to the trunk and then the arms and legs, before disappearing in the same sequence
- Aching joints, especially in young women

Diagnosis

The rubella rash can look like many other viral rashes. So doctors usually confirm rubella with the help of laboratory tests. You may have a virus culture or a blood test, which can detect the presence of different types of rubella antibodies in your blood. These antibodies indicate whether you've had a recent or past infection or a rubella vaccine.

Treatment

No treatment will shorten the course of rubella infection, and symptoms are so mild that treatment usually isn't necessary. However, doctors often recommend isolation from others, especially pregnant women, during the infectious period.

Scientists in the United States and other countries have carefully studied the MMR vaccine. No link has been found between autism and the MMR vaccine.

Complications

Rubella is a mild infection. Once you've had the disease, you're usually permanently immune. Some women with rubella experience arthritis in the fingers, wrists and knees, which generally lasts for about one month. In rare cases, rubella can cause an ear infection (otitis media) or inflammation of the brain (encephalitis).

However, if you're pregnant when you contract rubella, the consequences for your unborn child may be severe. Up to 90 percent of infants born to mothers who had rubella during the first 11 weeks of pregnancy develop congenital rubella syndrome. This can cause one or more problems, including:

- Growth retardation
- Cataracts
- Deafness
- Congenital heart defects
- Defects in other organs
- Mental retardation

The highest risk to the fetus is during the first trimester, but exposure later in pregnancy also is dangerous.

Prevention

The rubella vaccine is usually given as a combined measles-mumps-rubella inoculation, which contains the safest and most effective form of each vaccine. Doctors recommend that children receive the MMR vaccine between 12 and 15 months of age, and again between 4 and 6 years of age, before entering school. It's particularly important that girls receive the vaccine to prevent rubella during future pregnancies.

For more sources of information on this topic visit:
ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov
THE MAYO CLINIC www.mayoclinic.org