

# Rubella Fact Sheet



## COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

### What is Rubella?

Rubella (German Measles) is a disease caused by a virus. Its symptoms are fever, rash, and swollen glands. Most cases are mild.

### Who gets Rubella?

In populations that have *not* been immunized, rubella occurs most often in childhood. Now that most children in Manitoba are immunized, rubella is not reported very often in children. However, teenage and adult infections still happen, especially in males who were born prior to April 1982.

### How is Rubella Spread?

Rubella is spread by direct contact with nose or throat secretions (e.g., spit, mucous) from infected individuals, including airborne droplets spread by coughing.

### What are the Symptoms of Rubella?

Rubella is usually a mild illness. Symptoms may include a rash, slight fever, joint aches, headache, runny nose and reddened eyes. The lymph nodes (located behind the ears and at the back of the neck) may swell, causing some soreness and/or pain.

The rash, which may be itchy, begins first on the face, and then moves downwards from head to foot, and lasts about three days. About half of all rubella infections happen without a rash.

### How Soon do Symptoms Appear?

Symptoms appear from 12 to 23 days after a person is infected with the rubella virus. This is called the “incubation period.” In most cases, symptoms appear 16 to 18 days after catching the virus.

### When and for How Long is a Person Able to Spread Rubella to Others?

A person with rubella is contagious, and can spread the disease to others, from seven days BEFORE to seven days AFTER the rash first appears.

### If You have had Rubella in the Past, Can You Catch it Again?

No. Most people who have had rubella once are immune to (protected against) second infections for the rest of their lives.

### Is There a Vaccine to Prevent Rubella Infections?

Yes. Rubella vaccine is given on or after a child’s first birthday, and again at 5 years of age (since October 1996). In Manitoba, the rubella vaccine is given at the same time as vaccines for two other common childhood diseases—measles and mumps. The Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccines are combined in one vaccine called MMR.

### What if You’re Not Immune to Rubella?

Rubella infection in pregnant women is dangerous because it can damage an unborn baby.

If a pregnant woman is infected with rubella, she may have a miscarriage or stillbirth, or the baby may be born with severe abnormalities. These include deafness, cataracts, heart defects, liver and spleen damage, and mental retardation. This is called the Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS). It happens to one out of four babies born to women who have rubella infection in the first three months of pregnancy. Luckily, CRS is very rare because many women are already immune to rubella infection.

### What can be done to Prevent the Spread of Rubella?

All children in Manitoba should get the MMR vaccine shortly after their first birthday, and again at 5 year of age. This vaccine is given at the same time as other childhood vaccines needed by the child at the same visit. Immunizing children against rubella not

only protects them against this disease but also *prevents the spread of disease to others in the community, especially pregnant women.*

**All women of child-bearing age should check with their doctor or local Public Health Unit to make sure they have been immunized against rubella.**

If a woman has not been immunized or had the natural disease confirmed by a blood test, she should see her doctor to be immunized. Pregnant women must wait until their pregnancy is completed; women planning pregnancy should wait at least three months after receiving vaccine before becoming pregnant.

Once a person is diagnosed with rubella, he or she will be advised to remain home from work or school until seven days after the onset of rash when the risk of passing infection to others has passed. All pregnant contacts are advised to check with their doctor to know if they are immune. If an exposed pregnant woman is not immune, blood tests can be done to check if she has been infected. Any rashes which occur during pregnancy should be reported to a doctor immediately.

For further information contact your doctor or local Public Health Unit. The Thompson number for public health is 677-6570.

- 1 Adapted for Manitoba from BC Ministry of Health: Health File #38b, July 1996 and readapted for the Burntwood Region, April 1998.