

What is Scarlet Fever?

Scarlet fever can occur when a person is infected by a bacteria called Group A streptococcus (GAS). The main symptom of scarlet fever is a bright red skin rash. It is caused by a toxin released from the bacteria.

GAS causes a variety of other diseases such as streptococcal sore throat (strep throat) and streptococcal skin infections (impetigo). GAS also causes septicemia, otitis media (ear infections), pneumonia, peritonsillitis (tonsillitis), wound infections, and rarely, necrotizing fasciitis and rheumatic fever.

Who can be infected?

Anyone can get scarlet fever, though it is not common. Often scarlet fever is a complication of untreated strep throat.

How are GAS bacteria spread?

The GAS bacteria are carried in the mouth and nasal fluids of sick people. It is spread to others by direct contact with nose and throat discharges of an infected individual or with their infected skin lesions. If you have touched someone or something with nose or throat discharges on them, then touch your own eyes, nose or mouth, you can spread it to yourself. The risk of spreading GAS is greatest when an individual is ill, such as when people have strep throat or an infected wound. The best way to keep from getting sick is to wash your hands often and avoid sharing eating utensils.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of scarlet fever usually appear within two days of a sore throat, which can appear within one to three days after exposure to GAS bacteria.

What are the symptoms of scarlet fever?

The most common symptoms of scarlet fever are:

- A rash that first appears as tiny red bumps on the chest and abdomen. This rash may then spread all over the body. It looks like a sunburn and feels like a rough piece of sandpaper. The rash is usually darker in the arm pits and groin areas. The rash lasts about two to five days. After the rash is gone, often the skin on the tips of the fingers, toes and groin area begins to peel (desquamation).
- The face is flushed with a pale area around the lips.
- The throat is very red, sore and can have white or yellow patches.
- A fever of 101°F (38.3°C) or higher is common. Chills are often seen with the fever.
- Glands in the neck are often swollen.
- A whitish coating can appear on the surface of the tongue. The tongue itself looks like a strawberry because the normal bumps on the tongue look bigger.

Other less common symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Headache
- Body aches

What is the treatment for scarlet fever?

Several forms of penicillin prescribed by a physician are available for treatment. Remember to take all the antibiotics as prescribed, even if you are feeling better.

How long is a person able to spread GAS bacteria?

An untreated person can spread the bacteria for as long as 21 days. People are not contagious after they have been treated with an appropriate antibiotic for at least 24 hours. People may carry the bacteria without having any symptoms of illness, but are much less contagious.

What can be done to help prevent GAS infections?

- Complete the course of antibiotics as prescribed.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing using a disposable tissue, then throw it away and wash your hands.
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing, or wiping a runny nose.
- Wash your hands before preparing food and before eating.
- Avoid sharing food or drinks, especially with people who are ill.
- Persons with sore throats should be seen by a doctor who can perform tests to determine whether they have “strep throat”. If test results are positive, the person should stay home from work, school or daycare for at least 24 hours after beginning antibiotic treatment, and until their symptoms are improving.
- Keep wounds covered until they are healed.
- Anyone with an infection (redness or inflammation around a wound) that does not improve despite keeping it clean and covered should see a healthcare provider as soon as possible.

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