

Introduction

Scarlet fever is a bacterial illness which causes a distinctive pink-red rash. It is caused by infection from a bacterium known as haemolytic streptococci, which belong to the streptococcus bacteria group.

Scarlet fever usually follows a sore throat (strep throat) or skin infection (impetigo) caused by particular strains of streptococcus bacteria. The scarlet fever rash occurs when the bacteria release toxins that make the skin go red.

The disease is very contagious. It can be caught by breathing in the bacteria in airborne droplets from an infected person's coughs and sneezes (see causes, above, for more information).

Scarlet fever is also known as scarlatina, though this sometimes refers to a mild form of the disease. Nowadays, scarlet fever is rare in the UK because of the regular use of antibiotics for strep infections.



What are the symptoms?

The characteristic symptom of scarlet fever is a widespread, fine pink-red rash that feels like sandpaper to touch. It may start in one place, but soon spreads to many parts of the body, such as the ears, neck and chest. It may itch.

The person will develop a flushed, red face, hence the name scarlet fever. Other symptoms include swollen neck glands, especially if you have a sore throat, and generally feeling unwell (see Symptoms, above). It takes around one to four days to develop symptoms after being infected.

Treating scarlet fever

Most mild cases of scarlet fever go away in about a week without treatment.

However, you are advised to get treatment as this will speed recovery. If it is left untreated, the skin may continue to shed for several weeks. There is also a higher risk of complications without treatment (see Complications, above).

Antibiotics

The most common treatment for scarlet fever is a 10-day course of antibiotics. This will usually be penicillin taken by mouth. For those allergic to penicillin, the antibiotic erythromycin can be used instead.

Symptoms usually go in a few days if the antibiotics are taken properly. The whole course of treatment must be finished to make sure the infection is fully cleared.

The fever will normally disappear within 12 to 24 hours of starting antibiotics.

Other treatments

If you have scarlet fever, drink plenty of cool fluids, especially if you do not have much of an appetite. Keep the room cool.

Paracetamol can also be taken to relieve aches and pains and bring down a high temperature. Calamine lotion can relieve the itch of the rash.

How long should I stay at home?

Stay away from school for 24 hours from the beginning of the antibiotic treatment. Most people recover around four to five days after starting treatment.