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## Scarlet fever

*3-minute read*

Scarlet fever is a type of bacterial throat infection that also features a red (scarlet) rash. It is also known as 'scarlatina'. It usually affects school-aged children aged 5 to 15.

Treatment with [antibiotics](#) means most people recover in about a week, but left untreated it can spread to other parts of the body and cause serious health problems.

### What causes scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is caused by a group A streptococcal (bacterial) infection.

It is spread by:

- [coughing](#) and sneezing
- contact with a contaminated surface, such as a plate or glass
- touching or kissing an infected person.

Children can also catch it by touching the sores of someone who has a scarlet fever skin infection.

Read more about [streptococcal infections](#).

### Scarlet fever symptoms

Symptoms of scarlet fever usually appear between one and three days after infection and include a very red [sore throat, fever](#) and a red rash.

Red blotches are the first sign of the rash, which then changes to look like sunburn and feel like sandpaper. The rash will probably appear about two days after the child starts feeling ill, but can appear before they feel sick or up to a week later. You may see it first on their neck, underarm or groin.

They may also have:

- a whitish coating on their tongue or throat
- red bumps on their tongue – it looks like a strawberry
- [headache](#)
- [abdominal pain](#), nausea and [vomiting](#)
- [chills](#)
- [very sore throat](#) and tonsils – [swallowing is difficult](#)
- swollen glands
- aches all over their body.

Your child may also have flushed cheeks, a pale area around the mouth, or bright red skin creases under the arms, elbows and groin area. Once the rash fades, you may notice peeling skin around the finger tips, toes and groin.

### Diagnosis and treatment of scarlet fever

You should see a doctor if your child has a very [sore throat](#) and red rash.

If your child has scarlet fever, the doctor may prescribe antibiotics. If left untreated, the bacteria might spread to the tonsils, lungs, skin, kidneys, blood or middle ear. Antibiotics will prevent serious health problems including [rheumatic fever](#), [kidney disease](#), [pneumonia](#) and [arthritis](#).

The doctor may also recommend rest, [pain relief](#) and that your child drinks a lot of water.

Your child will stop being infectious 24 hours after they start antibiotics. If they don't have antibiotics, they can still be infectious for two to three weeks.

### Scarlet fever prevention

The best way for your child to avoid scarlet fever is by washing their hands often, and to not share plates or utensils with other people.

To avoid giving it to other people, they should cover their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.

Children with scarlet fever should stay home while they are unwell, and for at least 24 hours after starting antibiotics.

## Sources:

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (*Scarlet fever: a group A streptococcal infection*), [WA Department of Health](#) (*Scarlet fever*), [Mayo Clinic](#) (*Scarlet fever complications*)

Last reviewed: April 2017

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