

# Scarlet Fever

*This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.*

Scarlet fever is an illness you don't hear about very often. Before the wide-spread use of antibiotics, scarlet fever was a common, and sometimes serious, childhood disease.

Hi. I'm Dr. Fleming-Dutra, a pediatrician. Today, we're going to talk about the cause of scarlet fever, how to tell if your child is sick with it, how it's treated, and how to prevent its spread.

Scarlet fever – sometimes called scarlatina – is a contagious bacterial infection. Although anyone can get scarlet fever, it usually affects children between five and 18 years old. Scarlet fever can be treated with antibiotics. It's caused by a group A *Streptococcus* bacteria -- or group A strep. This is the same germ that causes strep throat. If it's treated with antibiotics, scarlet fever is no more serious than strep throat.

A child with scarlet fever will usually have the symptoms of strep throat, plus a red skin rash that feels like sandpaper. Sometimes scarlet fever can occur with strep skin infections, such as impetigo, but most of the time it occurs with strep throat. Only a small group of children who have strep throat will also have scarlet fever.

The rash typically starts on the neck and spreads to the chest, trunk, arms, and legs. Your child's face may also be flushed, with a pale area surrounding the mouth. The rash usually fades in about seven days – although it occasionally may last up to two weeks. The affected skin may peel, especially near the finger tips, toes and sometimes other places on the skin. In addition to the rash, your child might have a sore throat, as well as a red, bumpy tongue that looks like a strawberry. A fever of 101 or 102 is common. He could have a headache, feel nauseous, and have pain when swallowing. Basically, the same symptoms you would see with strep throat. The skin might also look redder near the elbow, groin, and underarm creases. These red creases don't mean the illness is getting worse. It's just another part of the scarlet fever rash.

Despite its scary name, the *good* thing about scarlet fever is that it's treatable. To make sure your child gets the best treatment possible, her health care provider will do a "strep test" which is a simple swab of the throat to see what kind of germ is making her sick. That's important because other things, like viruses or allergens, can also cause a sore throat and a rash.

If the strep test is positive, it means your child *is* infected with group A strep bacteria and needs to take an antibiotic. Viral sore throats don't respond to antibiotic treatment; and that's why it's so important to get tested.

Although scarlet fever usually causes a mild illness, if left untreated, it can result in serious complications, like kidney disease, throat abscesses, and even rheumatic fever which affects the heart. Treatment of strep throat and scarlet fever with antibiotics can protect your child from most complications, including rheumatic fever.

Scarlet fever *is* pretty contagious. Droplets from a cough or sneeze by an infected person can make your child sick. Here are some tips that can help prevent scarlet fever, strep throat, and many other infections in your child and your whole family:

- One of the best ways to prevent the spread of scarlet fever is to wash your hands often. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Don't share drinking glasses or utensils.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing to prevent passing germs. Instead of covering a cough or sneeze with your hands, use your sleeve or a tissue.
- Make sure you have tissue boxes within everyone's reach and provide a sick child with his own set of towels and wash cloths.

If you have any concerns or questions related to your child's illness, call your health care provider.

For more information about scarlet fever, visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and select "Scarlet Fever" from the A-Z list.

*For the most accurate health information, visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.*