



## Durham Region Health Department Facts about...



# Rubella (German Measles)

## What is it?

Rubella (German measles) is a highly contagious infection caused by a virus. For most children and adults, rubella is a mild illness. Rarely, rubella can cause inflammation of the brain. The incidence of rubella has declined in Ontario since a two-dose MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccination program was introduced in 1996. Cases of rubella generally occur in children who were not vaccinated or individuals who received only one dose of the vaccine.

Rubella is very dangerous for a pregnant woman as it can cause miscarriage, stillbirth and birth defects called **congenital rubella syndrome** (CRS). CRS occurs in up to 90% of infants born to women infected with rubella during the first trimester. The risk is 10-20% by the 16<sup>th</sup> week of gestation and is rare when the woman is infected after the 20<sup>th</sup> week of gestation. The most common disabilities of CRS are blindness, deafness, mental impairment, and heart defects.

## How is it spread?

The virus is spread from person to person through direct contact with nose and throat secretions of an infected person or when droplets are inhaled when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Rubella is contagious from 7 days before the rash appears and at least 4 days after. Babies born with congenital rubella syndrome can spread the virus via their nose and throat secretions and urine for up to one year after birth.

## What do I look for?

Up to half of children and adults infected with rubella do not develop any symptoms. For those with symptoms, they may have a red rash, low-grade fever, headache, tiredness, red eyes, runny nose, joint pain, and swollen and tender glands. The swollen glands are usually behind the ears and at the back of the head. The rash usually begins on the face and spreads down to the feet within 24 hours and lasts about 3 days. Symptoms generally develop within 2 to 3 weeks after contact with someone infected with rubella.

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## How is it treated?

There is no treatment for rubella and symptoms usually resolve on their own. Antibiotics are not effective because the disease is caused by a virus. If you are diagnosed with rubella, you must remain isolated at home and avoid contact with pregnant women for 7 days after your rash first appears. Babies with congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) must be closely followed by a healthcare provider.

## How can I protect myself?

- Rubella is best prevented by vaccination.
- See 'Facts About... Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR) Vaccine'.
- See 'Facts About... Measles, Mumps, Rubella and Varicella (MMRV) Vaccine'.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and speak to your health care provider about your need for other vaccines.
- Wash your hands frequently thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly dirty.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow and encourage others to do the same.
- Wash your hands after handling nose and throat secretions (i.e., after disposal of facial tissues containing nose and throat secretions).
- Do not share water bottles, straws, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, toys or anything that has been in contact with saliva, nose or throat secretions.
- If you are ill, stay at home and isolate yourself from others, especially pregnant women.

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