



Scarlet Fever Fact Sheet

What is Scarlet Fever?

Scarlet fever can occur when a person is infected by Group A streptococcal (GAS) bacteria. Scarlet fever is characterized by a bright red skin rash. It occurs when the infecting strain of streptococcus produces a toxin to which a person is sensitized but not immune.

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

Who can be infected?

Anyone can get scarlet fever, though it is uncommon, and often known to be a complication of untreated strep throat.

How are GAS bacteria spread?

Streptococcal bacteria are spread when a person with strep throat or scarlet fever coughs or sneezes directly on another person. Casual contact, such as sitting next to an infected person, rarely leads to infection.

How soon after infections do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of scarlet fever usually appear within two days of a sore throat, which can appear within 1 to 3 days of exposure to "strep throat" bacteria.

What are the symptoms of scarlet fever?

Clinical characteristics may include all symptoms associated with a streptococcal sore throat as well as a "strawberry" tongue and a rash over the upper body and skin folds. The rash is usually fine, red, rough-textured and commonly turns white on finger pressure. High fever, nausea and vomiting often accompany severe infections. During recovery, peeling of the skin often occurs, usually at the tips of the fingers and toes.

What is the treatment for scarlet fever?

Several forms of penicillin are acceptable and available for treatment.

How long is a person able to spread GAS bacteria?

An untreated person with an uncomplicated case can spread bacteria for as long as 21 days. With adequate penicillin therapy, the treated person is generally only contagious for 24 hours.

Can a person get scarlet fever more than once?

Second attacks of scarlet fever are rare, but can occur, as there are three different forms of streptococcal toxin.

What can be done to help prevent GAS infections?

The spread of all types of GAS infections may be reduced by good hand washing. Be especially careful to wash hands after coughing, sneezing, wiping a runny nose and before preparing foods or eating. Covering the mouth and nose when sneezing and coughing also prevents person to person spread of disease. Persons with sore throats should see a physician. Persons diagnosed with "strep throat" should stay home from work, school or child care centers until antibiotics have been taken for 24 hours.