

# SCARLET FEVER FACT SHEET

## What is scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is caused by bacteria called group A *Streptococcus* or group A strep. The rash is caused by a poison made by the bacteria. Scarlet fever most often occurs along with strep throat, but can also occur with group A strep skin infections.

## Who can get scarlet fever?

Anyone. However, it is more common in children than adults, particularly children 5–15 years old. Parents of school-aged children and adults who are often in contact with children will have a higher risk for scarlet fever than adults who are not around children very often. People can get scarlet fever more than once.

## What are the symptoms of scarlet fever?

Scarlet fever is generally a mild infection. The symptoms of scarlet fever usually include the following:

- Sore throat
- Fever
- Red rash that has a sandpaper feel
- Bright red skin in the creases of the underarm, elbow and area where your stomach meets your thighs
- Whitish coating on the tongue early in the illness
- Swollen glands in the neck

Some people may also have headache or body aches, nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually begin 2–5 days after being exposed to group A strep.

## How is scarlet fever spread?

Group A strep live in the nose and throat and can easily spread to other people. The bacteria travel in small droplets of water called respiratory droplets that are created when someone who is infected coughs or sneezes. You can get sick if you breathe in those droplets or if you touch something that has the droplets on it and then touch your mouth or nose. You could also become ill if you drink from the same glass or eat from the same plate as a sick person.

It is possible to get scarlet fever from touching sores on the skin caused by group A strep (impetigo).

## How is scarlet fever diagnosed?

Health care providers can test for scarlet fever by swabbing the throat and testing for group A strep bacteria. An illness that includes a red rash and sore throat can be caused by many viruses and bacteria. It is very important to determine if group A strep is the cause.

## How is scarlet fever treated?

Scarlet fever is treated with antibiotics. It is important to take the full course of the antibiotics as prescribed even when one starts feeling better. Not finishing the full course of the medication can result in a longer infection or more serious complications.

## How can people protect themselves against scarlet fever?

The following steps can prevent the spread of scarlet fever:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds
- Avoid sharing eating utensils (forks, cups, etc.) with someone who is sick with scarlet fever
- When you cough or sneeze cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or your upper sleeve or elbow (not your hands) if you don't have a tissue

## Should a person with scarlet fever stay home from school/daycare?

A child with scarlet fever should stay home until 24 hours after treatment has started and they no longer have fever. A doctor's note stating that they are under treatment should be submitted upon their return.

## Where can I get more information?

Information about scarlet fever and other related health topics can be found at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit [www.doh.dc.gov](http://www.doh.dc.gov) or call (202) 442-9371.