

Rubella (German Measles)

The Disease

When children get rubella, it is usually a mild disease, with a slight fever that lasts for about 24 hours, and a rash on the face and neck that lasts two or three days.

Rubella is also called *German measles* or *3-day measles*. It is caused by the rubella virus, and usually strikes in the winter and spring. It is spread through close contact such as coughing, sneezing, or talking. Most children recover quickly and completely.

Rubella also strikes adults, and outbreaks can occur among teenagers and adults who have not been immunized. Adults who get rubella may get swollen glands in the back of the neck and pain, swelling, or stiffness in their joints (arthritis).

But the greatest danger from rubella is not to children or adults, but to unborn babies. If a woman gets rubella in the early months of her pregnancy, there is an 80% chance that her baby will be born with birth defects. This is called ***Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS)***. Babies with CRS may be born deaf or blind. They may have damaged hearts or small brains. Many are mentally retarded. Miscarriages are also common among women who get rubella while they are pregnant.

It takes about 12-23 days from the time of exposure for people to start showing signs of the disease. Rubella is most contagious while the rash is visible, but it can be spread from about a week before the rash starts until about a week after.

Rubella Fact: The last major rubella epidemic in the United States was in 1964-65. An estimated 12½ million people got the disease, including 20,000 babies born with congenital rubella syndrome. This epidemic cost the country an estimated \$1.5 billion.

Rubella Immunization

Rubella vaccine was first licensed in the U.S. in 1969, and the vaccine we use today was licensed in 1979. It is a live, attenuated (weakened) vaccine.

There are now only several hundred cases reported each year, with the record low (128 cases) reported in 1995.

Rubella vaccine can be given by itself, but it is usually given together with measles and mumps vaccines in a shot called MMR. [Click here to jump to the chapter about MMR vaccine.](#)