

German Measles (Rubella)

German measles used to be one of the most common childhood diseases. It is now very uncommon because of effective vaccination programs. Today, German measles in children is rarely a serious problem. It can be serious if it occurs in pregnant women who have not been vaccinated.

What is German measles?

German measles, or rubella—sometimes called “three-day measles”—is an easily spread illness that is relatively mild, causing a rash and swollen lymph glands. In the past, it was a widespread childhood disease, with outbreaks affecting millions of children. Today, nearly all infants are vaccinated, and German measles has become rare.

However, outbreaks still occur, especially in children from other countries or in groups of people who have not been vaccinated.

 *In pregnant women who have not been vaccinated, German measles can cause serious problems to the developing fetus.*

German measles is different from another childhood infection called simply measles, or rubeola.

What does it look like?

- German measles begins with a few days of a mild illness, similar to that of a cold.
- The child then develops swollen, tender lymph glands, mainly in the head and neck.
- A day or so later, small red spots appear, often with a bump in the center. This rash occurs first on the face and then spreads over the entire body. Your child may have mild itching.
- The rash develops, spreads, and fades very rapidly. By the third day, it is usually gone completely.
- Joint pain and swelling may occur, especially in girls.

What causes German measles?

- German measles is caused by the rubella virus. This virus is very common around the world and is highly contagious; it may be spread even if the infected person does not appear sick. With the development of effective vaccines against rubella, German measles has nearly been eliminated in the United States.

- Once your child has had or been vaccinated against German measles, he or she will likely be protected against this disease in the future.

What are some possible complications of German measles?

- *Congenital rubella syndrome* is the most serious complication of German measles. It occurs when a pregnant woman is infected with the rubella virus early in pregnancy and passes it on to her developing baby. The disease can be severe, causing serious illness, brain damage, and death. Fortunately, because of the widespread use of rubella vaccination, congenital rubella is now rare in the United States. 
- In children with rubella, complications are rare. There is a small chance of rubella infection involving the brain (encephalitis).

Can German measles be prevented?

Yes. Rubella vaccination greatly reduces your child's chances of getting the disease. Measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccination is recommended for nearly all children: one dose at age 12 to 15 months; a second dose at age 4 to 6 years. There is a low risk of some mild symptoms occurring after MMR vaccination, such as fever and a rash.

How is German measles treated?

- Usually, no specific treatment is needed for rubella. The rash develops and clears up quickly, most often within a few days.
- If your child is uncomfortable or has a very high fever, give him or her acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- As much as possible, have your child's avoid contact with other people until he or she is well. Rubella can spread quickly among people who have not been vaccinated.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child has not received all recommended vaccinations.
- You are pregnant and have been in contact with someone who has rubella. 