Rubella

Questions and answers

immunisation

THE SAFEST WAY TO PROTECT YOUR CHILD
Rubella
Questions and answers

What is rubella?
Rubella, or German measles, is a mild disease caused by a virus. Before the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine was used, rubella used to be common in childhood. If you catch it, you may have a rash and feel a bit unwell, or you may not even notice it. If you catch rubella in early pregnancy, it can be passed on to your unborn baby – and it can cause serious damage to him or her. A baby born with rubella is said to have congenital rubella.

What damage can congenital rubella do?
Rubella can severely affect your unborn baby’s sight and hearing. It can also damage the heart and brain.
If you catch rubella in the first two to three months of pregnancy, it is more likely to cause severe damage to your baby than if you catch it later on. After you have been pregnant for about four months, it is unlikely the virus will damage your baby.
If you catch rubella or develop any rash in the early months of pregnancy, you and your partner or family should discuss this with your doctor. After you have had a blood test, you will be in a better position to decide the future of your pregnancy.

How can I protect myself against rubella?
You can protect yourself from rubella by being immunised before you become pregnant. Your doctor or nurse can do this. First you will have a blood test to check if you are already immune. Then if you need it, you can be immunised.

I had rubella as a child. Am I immune?
You are only immune if a blood test tells you are. Rubella is very hard to recognise and what you were told was rubella could easily have been something else.

I have been immunised before. How do I know I’m still protected?
Protection through immunisation seems to be long term. The immunisation has been used for around 25 years and most of the people immunised when it was first introduced are still protected. But no immunisation protects everybody. In about 5% of cases (less than 1 in 20) the immunisation doesn’t work. This may be because your body hasn’t produced enough protection or antibody, or because the vaccine hasn’t been stored or handled properly. In most cases another immunisation will work.

Before you get pregnant you should have the blood test and check that you are immune to rubella.

I thought I was immune, but my blood has just been tested and now they say I’m not. Why?
The blood test has measured if you have enough protection (antibody) against rubella. Some women have low levels of antibody and may need immunisation. Women with low or uncertain levels of antibody can be immunised again.
The following are reasons why you may not be fully immune:
• Somebody made a mistake when they reported either the first or second result.
• You thought you had rubella in the past, but didn’t.
• You thought you had the rubella vaccine, but it was a vaccine against something else.
• You did have the vaccine but you were one of the 5% of women for whom the first immunisation didn’t work.
In all of the above cases you should have another immunisation.

I had a blood test for rubella in my last pregnancy and they said I was immune. Will I still be protected in my next pregnancy?
You will almost certainly still be protected. The only way to be really sure is to ask your doctor or nurse to check your immunity to rubella before you get pregnant again.
Questions pregnant women ask

I'm pregnant and my friend has rubella, or something like it. What should I do?

You need to see your doctor as soon as possible. Even if you have been immunised, or have been told that you are immune to rubella, it is very important to have the tests. You should also avoid contact with the person who might have rubella until you have seen the doctor. Your doctor will be able to give you all the information and help that you need.

I'm pregnant and I've got a rash. What should I do?

A rash doesn't mean that you have rubella. Whatever the cause, you should see your doctor as soon as possible. The doctor will arrange for you to have a blood test to check if it is rubella. You should do this even if you or your doctor believes that you are immune to rubella.

I've just been immunised against rubella and now I find that I was pregnant at the time. Will my baby be damaged?

Doctors advise women not to get pregnant for one month after a rubella immunisation. But if you are pregnant, you should talk to your doctor. Studies of several hundred women who have continued their pregnancies after immunisation at this time have shown that none of the babies suffered rubella damage. Your doctor will be able to give you information and help.

Can you catch rubella more than once? Can someone who is known to be immune catch rubella?

Both of these situations are very rare. But it can happen so it is important to be checked if you have a rash or are in contact with a rash when you are pregnant.

To get rid of rubella, the chain of infection must be broken. Most pregnant women who catch rubella have done so from young children or boys and young men who have not been immunised. This is why all children are now offered immunisation with MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine at thirteen months old and again when they start school. This means there will be far less chance of catching rubella. Eventually the disease will disappear in this country and there will be no more babies born with congenital rubella. Until then, make sure that you are protected against rubella before you get pregnant. And if you have young children, make sure they are immunised.