SCARLET FEVER

What is it?

Scarlet fever is a fairly common childhood illness. It is caused by bacteria (streptococci) and is characterised by a rash. These bacteria more often cause a sore throat alone, but occasionally the body reacts to the poisons the bacteria produce and a rash develops.

How do I know if someone has it?

The main symptoms include a nasty sore throat and fever. The rash is a fine, raised, red rash (feels like sandpaper) which disappears momentarily when pressed. It appears most commonly on the neck, chest, under the arms, elbows and inner thighs. The rash does not usually affect the face which is flushed. During convalescence the skin usually peels on the fingers and toes.

Is it infectious?

Yes, to close contacts of the patients, by droplets in the air, and rarely by indirect contact through objects or hands.

What is the incubation period?

Short, usually 1 to 3 days, rarely longer.

Is there any treatment?

Penicillin reduces the length of the illness and the possibility of rare complications. There are alternatives for people allergic to penicillin.

What should I do if someone has the illness?

- Consult your doctor who will confirm the diagnosis and decide about treatment.
- The infected person should rest while they have a fever.
- Keep a child with a fever cool by reducing clothing and bed clothes and by giving paracetamol as prescribed on the bottle. Sponging a child down with cool water will help to bring the temperature down.
- If possible, babies and people with low resistance to infection (immunosuppression) should avoid contact with the patient.

How soon can you return to school or work?

People are infectious from the day the sore throat starts until 5 days after starting antibiotics. After that they should return to school or work when they feel well.

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