

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 get 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 is likely to be passed on to your unborn baby – and it can cause serious damage to him or her.

What damage can rubella do to my baby?

Rubella can severely affect your unborn baby's sight, hearing, heart and brain.

If you catch rubella in the first 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 as soon as possible. After you have had a blood test, you will be in a better position to decide the future of your pregnancy.

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





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 with MMR.

I had rubella as a child. Am I immune?

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

Immunisation is the only way to protect yourself against rubella.

Why am I being offered MMR and not single rubella vaccine?

Single rubella vaccine is no longer available because manufacturers are concentrating on producing MMR as it is internationally recognised as the vaccine of choice against measles, mumps and rubella.

Doesn't MMR vaccination cause autism?

There is no good scientific evidence of a link between MMR and autism and there is an ever-increasing body of research that shows no evidence of a link.

I have been immunised before.

How do I know I'm still protected?

Protection through immunisation seems to be long term. Rubella-containing vaccine has been used for around 30 years and most of the people immunised when it was first introduced are still protected. But no immunisation protects everybody. In about two per cent of cases (about one in 50) 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.

I thought I was immune, but my blood has just been tested and now they say I'm not. Why?

The reason for doing the rubella immunity test is to identify women who are at risk of catching rubella. The test measures the level of antibodies (protection) in your blood. In most cases the result of the test is clear, but some women have low levels of antibody. Although a low level of antibody may be protective, it is a good idea to have the vaccine again.

Other possible reasons include:

- somebody made a mistake when they reported either the first or second blood test result
- you thought you had rubella in the past, but you 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 few people for whom the first immunisation didn't work.

In all of the above cases you should have the MMR vaccine. If you are already pregnant, you will need to wait until after you have had the baby.

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.

Can I have MMR vaccine if I am breast-feeding? Won't my baby be affected by the vaccine?

MMR vaccine can be given to breast-feeding mothers without any risk to their baby. Very occasionally rubella vaccine virus has been found in breast milk but this has not caused any symptoms in the baby. There is no



evidence of mumps and measles viruses being found in a mother's milk and even if they were, your baby's digestive system would kill them.

So your baby won't be affected by your having the MMR vaccine to protect you and your next baby from rubella.

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. If possible you should also avoid contact with the person who may have rubella until you have seen the doctor or your friend's illness has been diagnosed. The infectious period lasts for about two weeks and starts five to seven days before the rash appears.

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

Women are advised 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 from rubella damage. Your doctor will be able to give you information and help.

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.

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.

I have recently arrived in the UK, and don't think that MMR or rubella vaccinations were offered in my country of birth. What should I do?

Not every country offers MMR or rubella vaccination and the advice is that you should have MMR. If you haven't had MMR before, then you should have two doses, with the second dose three months after the first dose. You should avoid getting pregnant for one month after your MMR vaccinations are completed.

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.

For more information visit www.sense.org.uk

