

Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS)

Rubella, sometimes called "German Measles", is caused by the rubella virus. Rubella is generally a mild illness, comprising fever, rash, swollen glands and joint pain. In many cases the symptoms are so mild that the illness may go unnoticed. After infection, even mild infection, one is usually immune and protected from rubella in the future.

Since rubella vaccination began in Australia in the 1970s there have been several changes to the vaccines used and the populations targeted. Today as part of the Australian National Immunisation Program (NIP), all children are offered Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine at 12 months of age and a second dose at four years. Vaccination has achieved and maintained a high level of community protection. Rubella is now a rare disease in Australia.

However, risk remains among some women of child-bearing age who may not be protected against rubella because they have not experienced rubella infection, have not received a vaccine against rubella, or have received vaccine but not developed protective immunity. It is the unborn children of these women who are at particular risk from rubella.

A pregnant woman who is not protected against rubella infection and who is infected with rubella virus in the first few months of pregnancy may be at higher risk of a stillbirth or miscarriage. The unborn child may be at risk of developing Congenital Rubella Syndrome, which includes serious birth defects such as blindness, deafness and cataracts as well as heart defects and intellectual disability.

Rubella: Frequently Asked Questions

1. How can I find out if I am protected against rubella infection?

A blood test can tell if you are protected against rubella infection. See your doctor who can arrange for a blood sample to be tested for evidence of previous exposure to rubella virus, either through vaccination or infection with the rubella virus.

2. I am not protected against rubella and want to have children - what should I do?

One dose of MMR vaccine provides protection against infection for approximately 90% of people. After a second dose (with at least one month between doses) almost all people are protected from infection.

In Australia, it is recommended that all people born after 1966 ensure they have received two doses of the vaccine. If in doubt they should receive a further dose or doses of MMR. It is advisable not to start a pregnancy for one month after receiving the vaccine. If you are thinking of getting pregnant sometime in the future, then the best action is to have a blood test now. This way if you need further vaccination, you will have sufficient time to be vaccinated and develop immunity before you start a pregnancy.



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Rubella: Frequently Asked Questions

3. What if I've already had two doses of MMR and am still not protected against rubella infection?

A very small number of people will not develop enough antibodies (immunity) to be sure of adequate protection against rubella even after two doses of vaccine.

If you are in this situation, ask your doctor to send your blood test to an accredited reference laboratory for rubella antibody testing. Routine testing methods can sometimes give results on people with low antibody levels that are difficult to interpret. A reference laboratory is a specialised laboratory which can do additional sophisticated tests to determine whether or not you are protected.

A further dose of MMR vaccine can be given to try to boost the level of antibodies - blood should be retested for immunity two months after the last dose of vaccine.

4. I am planning my first pregnancy. I had Rubella vaccine in Grade 6; do I need to have it again?

Depending on your age, it is possible that you have only had one dose of rubella vaccine. The current recommendation in Australia is that all people born after 1966 receive two doses of the Measles Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine – you may need to have a second dose. You should see your doctor who can arrange for you to have a blood test to check your immunity, vaccinate you if you require it and follow it up with another blood test.

5. I am pregnant and I don't remember having Rubella or a vaccine at school. How can I check if I am protected against rubella infection?

A rubella antibody test is available to all pregnant women in Australia. This measures your level of protection against the virus.

6. I am pregnant and the blood test shows that I am not protected against rubella.

(A) Can I be vaccinated now?

Having a rubella-containing vaccine during pregnancy is not recommended. Your doctor will organise for you to have the vaccine after the birth of your baby, generally before you leave hospital.

(B) As I am not protected and cannot have the vaccine, how can I prevent my unborn child from becoming infected with rubella?

The incidence of rubella in Australia is very low. The risk of getting infected is therefore very low, but not zero. The following strategies may provide some further protection to you and your unborn child:

- Make sure other children with whom you have very close contact are properly vaccinated for their age with MMR vaccine.

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- Make sure all other family members are protected against rubella infection, especially the teenage and adult men who may not have received adequate vaccination.
- Ask your friends whether they and their children are protected against rubella infection. If they are not protected, or do not know, encourage them to seek advice from their doctor about vaccination.
- Avoid close contact with people who have a fever and rash. Rubella is spread by direct contact with nose and throat droplets of infected people, particularly through sneezing and coughing. Ask people around you to practice good cough etiquette by containing their sneeze or cough in a tissue or handkerchief and washing their hands after sneezing and coughing.
- Many less developed countries, including some popular travel destinations, have ongoing rubella infection circulating among their populations. Tourists occasionally get infected. Seek advice on this matter from your doctor. You may consider deferring travel to such countries until after the birth of your baby.
- Encourage family members planning overseas travel to seek advice from their doctor about whether they should receive a dose of MMR vaccine before travelling.

7. What should I do if I think I have come into contact with someone who has rubella or I think I may have it myself?

See your doctor as soon as possible to arrange blood tests to try to establish whether or not you have had the infection, either recently or in the past. Specialist reference laboratory testing and interpretation may be required for pregnant women who do not have immunity. Some authorities suggest routine testing for evidence of infection, every month for the first twenty weeks of pregnancy. The aim of this testing is to be able to reassure these women that they have not had a rubella infection during this early part of the pregnancy when rubella infection is dangerous.

8. I would like to have another baby. I had a blood test for rubella before my last pregnancy; will I still have enough immunity?

It is most likely that you still have immunity, however the only way to know for sure is by asking your doctor to do a repeat blood test at least two months before you plan to start your next pregnancy.

9. Is it possible to catch rubella more than once?

It is very unusual, although possible to catch rubella a second time. There have been a small number of documented cases of birth defects in babies born to mothers who contracted rubella a second time.



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10. I am pregnant with my second child. My first child is due for his second dose of MMR vaccine. Is it possible that this could harm my unborn baby?

The MMR vaccine contains a weakened form of the virus. There is no evidence that a person can catch rubella from someone who has recently been vaccinated.

11. Will the vaccine harm my baby if I have it when I am breastfeeding?

Having the MMR vaccine whilst breast feeding will not harm your baby. Many women have had the vaccine in the post natal period and there is no evidence that this has caused symptoms in the baby.

12. I had measles virus when I was a child. Do I need to have MMR vaccine or can I have rubella-only vaccine?

A rubella-only vaccine is no longer available in Australia. The MMR vaccine will provide immunity against mumps and rubella and boost the measles immunity you may already have.

Your feedback is welcome. Email rubella@deafness.org.au



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