



## PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

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# Rubella

## “German Measles”

### What is rubella?

Rubella (also called German measles) is a contagious illness caused by a virus.

### What are the symptoms?

Rubella illness is usually mild. Symptoms begin 16 to 18 days after exposed. Common symptoms include a slight fever, swelling of the lymph glands (often in the back of the neck), joint pain, and a rash that usually lasts three days. About half of all people who get the disease do not have symptoms.

### Is rubella dangerous?

Rubella is usually a mild disease; however, it is dangerous if a woman gets it while she is pregnant. Rubella can cause birth defects such as deafness, blindness, heart problems, mental retardation, or bone problems in babies before they are born. This risk is greatest in the first trimester. Rubella can also cause miscarriages or fetal death. Because of this, **all** women who want to have children should have their blood tested to make sure that they are immune to rubella.

### How is rubella spread?

The rubella virus is found in the noses and throats of infected people. Direct contact with nose/throat secretions or exposure to the cough or sneeze of an infected person can spread the disease. People infected with rubella are contagious from 7 days before until 7 days after onset of the rash.

### Who gets rubella?

- Anyone who has never had rubella illness or has never been vaccinated
- Babies younger than 12 months old because they are too young to be vaccinated

### How is rubella diagnosed?

Because rubella can look like other diseases that cause a rash, the only sure way to diagnose rubella is by a blood test.

### How can I prevent rubella?

- Protect your children by having them vaccinated against rubella. Rubella vaccine is usually given in shot called MMR, which protects against mumps and measles as well as rubella. MMR vaccine is usually given to children at 12-15 months of age and again at 4-6 years old.
- Adults and older children who are not immune should get the MMR vaccine.
- Women who plan to have children and who are not immune should get the MMR vaccine at least 1 month before getting pregnant.

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## **Is MMR vaccine safe?**

Yes, it is safe for most people. Sometimes people may experience a fever, rash, or swelling of the lymph glands in the neck one to two weeks after getting the MMR vaccine. Rarely allergic reaction or other severe problems occur.

## **Who should not get MMR vaccine?**

- People who have serious allergies to gelatin, the drug neomycin, or a previous dose of the vaccine.
- Pregnant women should not get MMR vaccine until after they deliver their babies.
- People with cancer, HIV, or other problems that weaken the immune system should check with their doctor or nurse before being vaccinated.
- People who have recently had a transfusion or were given other blood products should check with their doctor or nurse before being vaccinated.
- People with high fevers should not be vaccinated until after the fever and other symptoms are gone.

**For more information, please contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control  
(617) 534-5611 or [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)**