

For Your Baby's Health

TESTING FOR RUBELLA

Rubella, sometimes called German measles or three-day measles, is a mild, infectious disease caused by a virus. Once thought harmless, doctors now realize that rubella kills or cripples babies whose mothers become infected while pregnant.

Rubella is not the same as regular measles, called rubeola, although both cause skin rashes. Often considered a childhood disease, many adults and teenagers may also become infected.

Rubella and the Unborn Baby

Rubella seriously threatens the life or health of an unborn baby whose mother catches it during pregnancy. The first three months are the most dangerous, but the fetus can still be affected by rubella after that time. The earlier in pregnancy the mother has rubella, the more serious the birth defects usually are. Some "rubella babies" die before or shortly after birth.

More common are the lifetime defects with which a baby may be afflicted. Among these are hearing loss or deafness; eye defects or blindness; heart defects; and brain and nerve defects, such as mental retardation, slowness in learning to walk, inability to perform simple functions and behavioral problems.

Some babies may have temporary defects, including small birth weight, feeding problems, diarrhea, pneumonia or anemia. Purplish spots may appear on their faces and bodies due to a bleeding tendency. The liver and spleen may be irritated and there may be temporary brain and spine problems.

Some defects don't show up until later in childhood. For these, surgery and training programs often are successful in correcting rubella-related defects.

Symptoms

A rash is the first noticeable symptom, but rubella's incubation period begins two or three weeks before the rash appears. A few days prior to the rash, the infected person may have painful lumps behind the ears, in the neck and around the lower back of the head. Tenderness disappears in a day or two, but the swelling lasts longer.

The rash may start on the face, quickly spreading down the body, arms and legs. It usually lasts about three days, although it may disappear more quickly. Sometimes there is no rash at all. A slight fever often accompanies the rash. Other symptoms which include headache, loss of appetite, sore throat and a general sick feeling are more common in adults and teenagers than children.

After effects of rubella are rare among children, although there have been cases of joint pain, sleeping sickness and blood clotting problems. Adults, especially women, often experience joint pain.

Testing for Rubella

A simple blood test can determine if a person has rubella or has had it at some time in their life. Those who have had rubella cannot get it again. This test is important for women of childbearing age even if they think they have had rubella. They may be mistaken, since many infections have symptoms similar to rubella.

Vaccinating Against Rubella

Vaccination against rubella makes people as immune to the disease as those who have had it. However, vaccination against regular measles (rubeola) will not protect against German measles and vice versa.

A rubella vaccination is recommended for all children, most teenagers and many adults (especially women), unless there is a medical reason not to receive it. The earliest a child should be vaccinated is 12 months. Women of childbearing age should be vaccinated only if they're sure they aren't pregnant and don't expect to be for the next three months. All women should be tested for rubella before they decide to conceive to determine if they have the disease or need to be vaccinated against it.

Breastfeeding mothers may be safely vaccinated, however anyone with a fever should wait until he or she recovers. Suitable vaccines are available for allergic patients and there is no harm in vaccinating persons who already have had rubella.

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If you have questions, call Lakeside Women's Hospital at 936-1500 or 1-800-586-7065.

Eliminating Rubella

Millions of people have received the rubella vaccine since it became available in 1969. Millions more must be vaccinated each year in order to wipe out the disease for all time.

Scientists are constantly working to improve rubella vaccines while public health educators work to impress everyone with the importance of rubella testing and vaccinations. Several states require rubella antibody testing of women of childbearing age before marriage.

With these efforts and the encouraging results so far, we look forward to a day when rubella can be eliminated as a cause of birth defects.

The information on rubella used in this material was supplied by the March of Dimes. For more information, contact your local chapter or physician.