



Group A Streptococcus

Group A streptococcus (GAS) is a common bacterium that can be found in the throat and on the skin. People may carry it and have no symptoms of illness or may develop infection. GAS does cause a number of infections, some mild and some more serious.

How is it spread?

Group A Streptococcus survives in throats and on skin for long enough to allow easy spread between people through sneezing and skin contact. People who are currently carrying the bacteria in the throat or on the skin may have symptoms of illness or they may have no symptoms and feel fine. In both cases, these bacteria can be passed on to others.

What kinds of illnesses are caused by Group A Streptococcus

Most illness are relatively mild. GAS causes infections in the skin, soft tissue and respiratory tract. It's responsible for infections such as strep throat/sore throat, tonsillitis, scarlet fever, impetigo and cellulitis

While infections like these can be unpleasant, they rarely become serious. When treated with antibiotics, an unwell person with a mild illness like tonsillitis stops being contagious 24-hours after starting their medication.

We are currently seeing high numbers of scarlet fever cases

Scarlet fever

Scarlet fever is mainly a childhood disease, with around 90% of cases occurring in children under 10 years old. It is most common in children between the ages of 2 and 8 years, with 4-year-olds most likely to develop the illness. Occasionally, outbreaks of scarlet fever occur in nurseries and schools. People of all ages can catch scarlet fever, but the disease is much less common in adults.

Symptoms

The first symptoms of scarlet fever often include a sore throat, headache, fever, nausea and vomiting.

- after 12 to 48 hours the characteristic fine red rash develops (if you touch it, it feels like sandpaper). Typically, it first appears on the chest and stomach, rapidly spreading to other parts of the body. On darker skin, the rash may be harder to spot, although the 'sandpaper' feel should be present
- fever over 38.3° C (101° F) or higher is common
- white coating on the tongue, which peels a few days later, leaving the tongue looking red and swollen (known as 'strawberry tongue')
- swollen glands in the neck
- feeling tired and unwell
- flushed red face, but pale around the mouth. The flushed face may appear more

- 'sunburnt' on darker skin
- peeling skin on the fingertips, toes and groin area, as the rash fades

It usually takes 2 to 5 days from infection before the first symptoms appear. However, the incubation period may be as short as 1 day and as long as 7 days.

Protection from scarlet fever

Scarlet fever is spread via the mucus and saliva of infected people. It can also be caught from sharing drinking glasses, plates or utensils they have used. To protect yourself from getting the illness you should:

- wash your hands often
- not share eating utensils with an infected person
- wash, or dispose of, handkerchiefs and tissues contaminated by an infected person
- be aware that you can catch scarlet fever by inhaling contaminated airborne droplets, if someone with the illness coughs or sneezes in the air near you.

If you think you, or your child, have scarlet fever:

- see your GP or contact NHS 111 as soon as possible
- make sure that you/your child take(s) the full course of any antibiotics prescribed. Although you or your child will feel better soon after starting the course of antibiotics, you must complete the course to ensure that you do not carry the bacteria in your throat after you have recovered
- stay at home, away from nursery, school or work for at least 24 hours after starting the antibiotic treatment, to avoid spreading the infection

You can help stop the spread of infection through frequent hand washing and by not sharing eating utensils, clothes, bedding and towels. All contaminated tissues or handkerchiefs should be washed or disposed of immediately.

Diagnosis and treatment

In most cases, doctors can diagnose scarlet fever from the symptoms alone. The diagnosis can be confirmed by taking a throat swab, which is then sent to a laboratory to identify the bacteria causing the infection. In some cases, a throat swab is not enough, and a blood test may be needed.

The usual treatment for scarlet fever is a 10-day course of antibiotics. The fever will usually subside within 24 hours of starting this, but it is important to take the whole course to completely clear these bacteria from your throat and protect others from becoming infected.

If scarlet fever is not treated with antibiotics, it can be infectious for 2-3 weeks after symptoms appear. Provided all prescribed antibiotics are taken as directed, most cases will not infect other people after 24 hours of treatment.

If you have a high temperature, you should drink plenty of fluids. You can also take paracetamol or ibuprofen to relieve discomfort.

Household contacts

Household contacts if well can attend an educational setting/work. However, they should

seek medical advice if they develop new symptoms of concern as discussed in the factsheet.

What is Invasive Group A Streptococcus (iGAS)

Although rare, invasive Group A Streptococcus disease may occur when the bacteria get into parts of the body where bacteria are not usually found. These infections are called invasive Group A Streptococcal disease and can be very serious and even life-threatening.

What is Invasive Group A Streptococcus (iGAS)

The most important thing to be aware of are the early signs and symptoms of invasive Group A Streptococcal disease. These are:

- High Fever
- Severe muscle aches
- Localised muscle tenderness
- Redness at the site of a wound
- If you develop any of these symptoms contact your GP or seek medical advice immediately.

Further information

If you would like more information about scarlet fever, useful resources are:

- *NHS Choices* <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/scarlet-fever/>
- *Recently published blog* - [Group A Strep - What you need to know - UK Health Security Agency \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

If you have any concerns about your health, see your GP or contact NHS 111.