

# Thinking of getting **pregnant?**



Make sure you're protected  
against **German measles**

Catching German measles (rubella) can be very serious for your baby. It can lead to blindness and deafness in your baby, and can even result in your losing the baby or having to consider a termination of your pregnancy.

This leaflet briefly describes how you can protect your unborn baby and the unborn children of those you are close to.

## What is German measles?

The proper name for German measles, is rubella. It is a mild and preventable disease caused by a virus. It is spread through air-borne droplets, coughing and sneezing for example. If you get it you may feel unwell, with swollen glands and a slight temperature or sore throat and rash.

You may develop a rash but some people have no symptoms at all, so they will never know that they are infectious and are passing the disease on to you or others.

Rubella is very serious if a pregnant woman catches it in the early stages of her pregnancy, because it can profoundly damage her unborn child. It can result in death of the baby or the possibility of a termination.

## When is someone infectious?

Someone can have the virus in their system for 14 to 21 days before they develop symptoms (Department of Health, 2006 *Immunisation against infectious disease*). Most people, but not everyone, will develop the rash

14 to 17 days after contact with the virus. They are infectious from one week before the symptoms appear to four days after the rash starts.

## When and how does it damage the child?

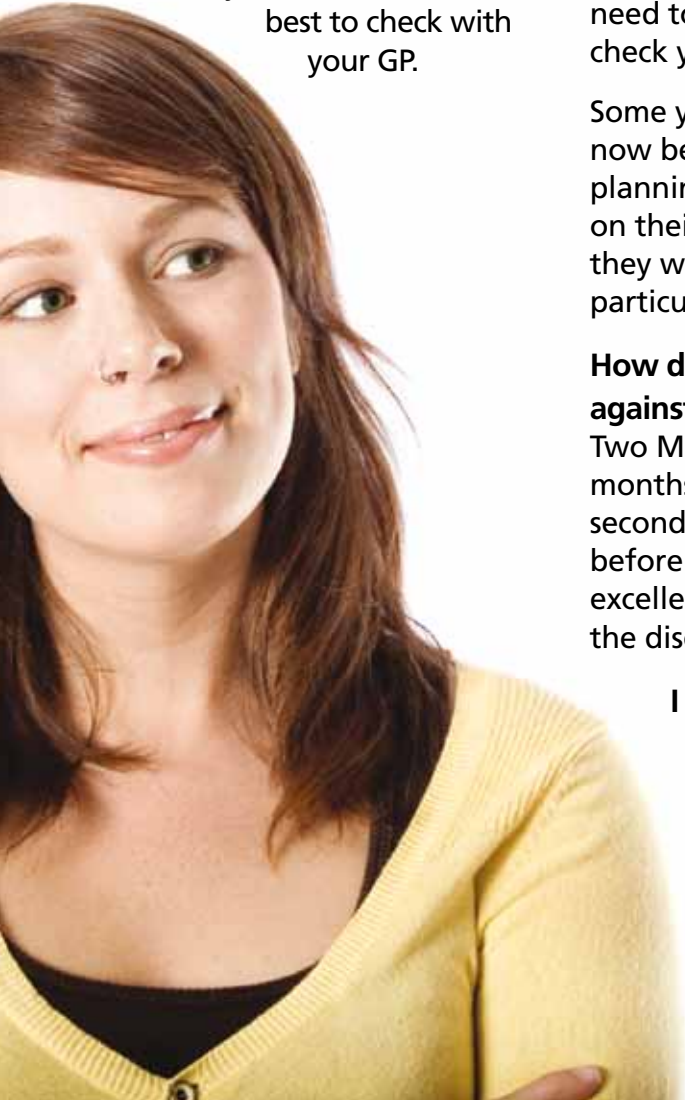
A baby born damaged by rubella is said to have Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS). Many will have hearing loss, cataracts, other eye conditions, and heart problems that require significant hospital treatment and affect the child throughout their life. A baby's brain can also be affected.

Rubella caught in the first ten weeks of pregnancy causes damage to nine out of ten unborn babies. The mother passes the virus on to her unborn baby and it damages the organs as they develop, particularly the developing eyes, ears, heart and brain – often in combination.

In the next six weeks of pregnancy, one out of five unborn babies are affected and this is usually restricted to hearing loss. Damage to the baby is rare later on in pregnancy.

## Protecting your unborn baby

Vaccination is the best protection against rubella. If you haven't been vaccinated, or aren't sure if you have been, there are a number of things you can do to ensure you and your family are protected. However, whatever your situation, it is best to check with your GP.



## Before your pregnancy

### How do I know if I'm already protected against rubella?

You need to be sure you had rubella or two MMR immunisations as a child. If you are not sure, you should check with your GP. You may need to have a blood test to check your immunity.

Some young women, who may now be starting to think about planning a family, missed out on their immunisations when they were children. They will be particularly at risk.

### How do I get protected against rubella?

Two MMR immunisations three months apart and with the second one at least a month before pregnancy will offer excellent protection against the disease.

### I had rubella as a child, can I catch it again?

It's extremely rare but it can happen, so it's important you have a rubella blood test if you're likely to get pregnant.



**I had a blood test for rubella before my previous pregnancy and was told I was immune – do I need another one?**

You will almost certainly still be protected but the only way to be absolutely sure is to have another test.

**I've only just arrived in the UK and I'm not sure which vaccinations I've had – what should I do?**

If you're planning to have a baby or might get pregnant, speak to your doctor to arrange for a rubella blood test and then two MMR immunisations, if you need them, as soon as possible.

Even if you've had the MMR vaccine before, having two more won't do any harm (if your blood test shows you need it). It's better to be sure you're immune than risk your baby's health.

**During**  
your pregnancy

**I'm pregnant and my blood test showed that I'm not immune to rubella. What can I do?**

The success of the MMR vaccination programme has meant that there is very little rubella circulating in the population now so it's less likely that you'll come into contact with someone who's infectious. But a number of children missed out on their MMR vaccinations in the last ten years.

This means that these children could spread rubella so you need to be aware of this risk. If any of your friends or their children have a rash, it's better to stay away from them until the rash has gone.

After you've had your baby, you should have the two vaccinations so you're protected next time you get pregnant (although you should still have another blood test then). The first vaccination will probably be given before you leave the hospital where you had your baby.

### **Can I have the MMR immunisations when I'm pregnant?**

This is not recommended. There's no evidence that the vaccine causes harm to unborn babies, but if you need the vaccine you should have it after your baby is born.

### **I've only recently had my MMR immunisations and now I'm pregnant – will my baby be OK?**

It's best to have your immunisations at least a month before getting pregnant. There's no evidence that the vaccine causes rubella damage to unborn babies but if you are still worried then talk to your GP or practice nurse.

### **I'm pregnant and my friend has rubella or something like it. What should I do?**

Speak to your doctor as soon as possible. Try to avoid further contact with your friend until your immunity is confirmed or your friend's illness diagnosed.

Someone with rubella starts being infectious five to seven days before the rash appears (although they don't always get a rash). They remain infectious for about two weeks.

### **I'm pregnant and I've got a rash. What should I do?**

It may not be a rubella rash but you should speak to your doctor as soon as possible. You may need to have a rubella blood test to check the cause of the rash.

## **After**

you've had your baby

### **During my pregnancy I was told that I wasn't immune to rubella, what should I do now?**

You need two doses of MMR vaccine. If you delivered in hospital, the first should be given before you go home. Your GP will give the second one.

### **How can I stop my new family catching rubella and passing it on to other pregnant women?**

You will be invited to immunise them with the MMR vaccine soon after their first birthday and again before they start school.

## Can I have the MMR immunisations while I'm breastfeeding?

Yes – the baby is not at risk. The virus in the rubella part of the vaccine has been found in breast milk, but breast-fed babies haven't developed the disease nor shown any symptoms.



## Getting rid of rubella

If everybody who can have it, has the MMR vaccination, there will be far less chance of catching rubella.

Before we used MMR, most pregnant women caught rubella from their own or their friends' children.

This is why all children are offered the MMR vaccination at 13 months of age and around three years and four months. This means there will be far less chance of catching rubella. The more children that are immunised the more likely it is that the disease will disappear in this country and babies will not be born with congenital rubella.

Until then, make sure that you are protected against rubella. This is especially important over the next few years as you may be one of the group of young women who missed out on their MMR vaccinations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. You need two doses of MMR or, you can have a blood test to check that you are immune.

And if you already have young children – boys or girls – make sure they are immunised with MMR. This protects them, breaks the chain of infection and protects any unimmunised pregnant women with whom they may come into contact.

## Vicki and Louise's story

Vicki didn't realise she'd caught German measles while she was pregnant because she didn't have any symptoms.

'To say it was a shock when Louise was born with so many problems is an understatement,' she says. 'Louise was so small and she nearly died in hospital.' The doctors kept coming back with more bad news – including that she had cataracts in her left eye and she was profoundly deaf.

The early months of Louise's life were extremely difficult – she was often ill and didn't grow as fast as other babies.

Despite this, she did gradually learn to become independent, went to school aged three and learnt to communicate using British Sign Language.

Now aged 20, she lives away from home at a college where she is learning vital skills to help her live as independently as possible in the future.

Life for Louise can be hard at times and Vicki wishes life had been easier. 'If you ever see a child with Congenital Rubella Syndrome, you would not think twice about immunising your child with the MMR vaccination,' she says.

## Where can I get more information?

Visit [www.nhs.uk/vaccinations](http://www.nhs.uk/vaccinations) or [www.sense.org.uk](http://www.sense.org.uk)  
Sense is a charity that supports rubella-affected families.

© Crown copyright 2011

403842 3ap 5k Aug11 (MAR) (407367)

If you require further copies of this leaflet visit [www.orderline.dh.gov.uk](http://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk) and quote *403842/Thinking of getting pregnant* or contact:

Tel: 0300 123 1002

Minicom: 0300 123 1003 (8am to 6pm, Mon-Fri)