**Tower Bridge Hospital London**

**Tower Bridge Hospital London**
97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT
020 7916 0029 · Open 7 days, 9am–7pm
towerbridgehospital.co.uk

PATIENT INFORMATION · PAEDIATRICS

# Scarlet fever and Strep A
## *one of the childhood rashes that always needs antibiotics*

Scarlet fever is caused by group A streptococcus, the same bacterium behind most bacterial sore throats. Unlike the viral rashes of childhood, it needs a full course of antibiotics — both to shorten the illness and to prevent complications that were once common and are now rare precisely because we treat it.

### Call 999 or go to an emergency department if a child

- is **breathing very fast, or working hard to breathe**
- has **severe muscle aches or pain out of proportion** to what you can see
- is **very drowsy, floppy, confused or difficult to rouse**
- has **cold hands and feet with mottled or blue skin**
- has **not passed urine for 12 hours**, or has no tears when crying
- has an area of skin that is **rapidly becoming red, hot and severely painful**

Invasive group A strep is rare but serious and can develop quickly, sometimes after chickenpox or a minor skin injury. Trust your judgement about how unwell a child looks rather than the rash itself. In an emergency call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

## Recognising scarlet fever

- **Sore throat and fever** first, often with headache, vomiting and abdominal pain
- A **fine pink-red rash appearing 12 to 48 hours later**, typically starting on the chest and abdomen and spreading. It feels like **sandpaper** to the touch — the texture is more reliable than the colour, particularly on darker skin
- **Flushed cheeks with a pale ring around the mouth**
- A **white coating on the tongue that peels to leave it red and bumpy** — strawberry tongue
- The rash is more intense in skin creases, at the elbows, armpits and groin
- Skin peeling from the fingertips, toes and groin in the weeks afterwards

## Treatment

- **A ten-day course of antibiotics**, usually penicillin. The full course matters even though the child feels better within a day or two — the point of the last days is preventing complications, not treating symptoms.
- Paracetamol or ibuprofen for fever and throat pain.
- Plenty of cool drinks; soft food if swallowing hurts.
- Calamine or an antihistamine if the rash is itchy.
- Keep fingernails short to limit scratching.

### Do not give ibuprofen if there is chickenpox as well

Anti-inflammatory medicines during chickenpox are associated with severe streptococcal skin and soft tissue infection. Strep A infection following chickenpox is a recognised and dangerous combination. If your child has chickenpox and develops a fever that returns, or an area of skin that becomes red, hot and very painful, seek help urgently and use paracetamol only.

## School, nursery and spread

**24 hours**
off school after starting antibiotics

**2–5 days**
incubation from exposure

**Notifiable**
we report cases to public health

- Children can return **24 hours after starting antibiotics**, provided they are well enough.
- Without antibiotics, someone remains infectious for two to three weeks.
- Wash hands frequently, bin used tissues, and do not share cups, cutlery or towels.
- Scarlet fever is a notifiable disease — we are required to inform public health, which is how outbreaks in schools are identified and managed.
- Tell the school or nursery, particularly if other children have sore throats.

## Why the full course matters

Untreated streptococcal infection can be followed by rheumatic fever, affecting the heart valves, and by a kidney condition called glomerulonephritis. Both are now uncommon in the UK, and that is a direct consequence of treating streptococcal infection properly. It is also why a child who cannot tolerate the medicine, or vomits it repeatedly, should be reviewed rather than left to see how it goes.

**Book an appointment if** your child has a sore throat with a rash, is not improving after 48 hours on antibiotics, develops a fever that returns after settling, or you would like a throat swab. We see children seven days a week and can swab and treat in a single visit.

## Throat swabs and same-day treatment

Children seen seven days a week, 9am–7pm, on Whitechapel Road.

**Book an appointment**

or call 020 7916 0029

### Where to get help

**Tower Bridge Hospital London**
97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT

**020 7916 0029**

WhatsApp **07903 284 189**
**info@mhwclinic.co.uk**
Open 7 days, 9am–7pm

**In an emergency**
Call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

**When we are closed and it is not an emergency**
Call NHS 111 or visit 111.nhs.uk.

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**Written and reviewed by Dr H Bolat, GP & Clinical Director** **Review date: 26 July 2026** **Next review due: July 2028**

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This leaflet is based on current NHS, NICE and UKHSA guidance on scarlet fever and group A streptococcal infection. It is general information and does not replace advice from a clinician who has assessed you. If your symptoms change or you are worried, contact us on 020 7916 0029, call NHS 111, or call 999 in an emergency.