What is Rubella?

Rubella is a viral infection. It is also called German Measles or Three-Day Measles. Most children are now vaccinated against rubella. However, it still occurs in unvaccinated children and young adults. The infection is often mild with a fever and rash that last about 3 days. Some people have no symptoms at all.

If a pregnant woman gets rubella, her unborn baby may also become infected. This is called congenital rubella and can cause very serious problems for the baby.

Why is rubella a problem for pregnant women?

When a pregnant woman, who has never had rubella or the rubella vaccine, gets the disease she may lose the pregnancy or the baby may be born with serious problems.

Women infected with rubella in the first 2 months of pregnancy have a very high chance of either losing the pregnancy or having a baby that has serious problems. In the 3rd and 4th month of pregnancy about half of the babies will have serious problems if the mother is infected. After 5 months of pregnancy, Rubella infection rarely causes problems.

Congenital rubella causes heart disease, deafness, and blindness. However, almost every organ in the baby can be affected. Even though a baby born to a mother who had congenital rubella may look normal at birth, any of these problems may develop as the baby gets older:

- Stunted growth
- Glaucoma
- Very small eyes
- Very small head & brain
- Blindness
- Cataracts (lens of eye becomes opaque)
How common is Rubella?

Most children used to get rubella by age 15. Now, most children are vaccinated against rubella so the number of cases of rubella is much lower. Children who do not get the vaccine have a high risk of getting rubella and can give rubella to pregnant women. Because rubella is so mild, many people do not remember if they had the disease as a child. A blood test can be done to check if a person has had rubella. Once a person has had rubella or rubella vaccine, they are protected from getting it again.

What are the symptoms of Rubella?

The symptoms of rubella include a slight fever, rash, and swelling of neck glands. These often last about three days. However, many people have no symptoms at all. In children, the first sign of infection is rash. In teenagers and adults, low grade fever, headache, cold symptoms, and swollen glands occur 1 to 5 days before the rash appears. Sometimes women will have swelling and aching in their joints for a week or two.

What happens if my baby is born with Rubella?

A baby born with rubella can give rubella to others and must be kept away from (isolated) other babies. If your baby is born with rubella you may stay with your baby but away from other mothers and babies. The baby may continue to be infectious for about one year. This means he/she should not be around pregnant women who have not had rubella.

How do we know whether a person has had Rubella?

A blood test can be done to see whether a person has had the disease. Ten to twenty percent of all women have not had rubella or rubella vaccine. A negative rubella blood test means the person can get rubella if exposed to the disease.

If a pregnant woman has a negative rubella blood test she should stay away from anyone who has this illness. However, since rubella is contagious before symptoms appear, pregnant women should stay away from day care centers, nursery schools, and elementary schools or anywhere else young children are likely to be.
What is Measles, Mumps, Rubella vaccine (MMR)?

Rubella vaccine comes in a combination with 2 other vaccines, measles and mumps, called MMR. MMR rubella vaccine is often given to infants at about fifteen months of age. Since MMR vaccine cannot be given during pregnancy, pregnant women with a negative rubella test are given MMR vaccine soon after the birth of their babies. This protects them from getting the disease in the future.

What else should I know about Rubella vaccine?

• Women who are breastfeeding may receive Rubella vaccine.
• You should not become pregnant for 3 months after getting the Rubella vaccine
• It is safe to give Rubella vaccine to a child whose mother is pregnant and not immune to rubella.

Ask your nurse or doctor if you have any other questions about rubella and pregnancy or about the vaccine.