



Public Health  
England

**NHS**

# Thinking of getting **pregnant?**



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

**i**mmunisation

the safest way to protect yourself and your baby

**Catching German measles (rubella) when you are pregnant can be very serious for your baby.**

**It can lead to blindness and deafness in your baby, and can even result in you 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 usually a mild disease caused by a virus.

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 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.

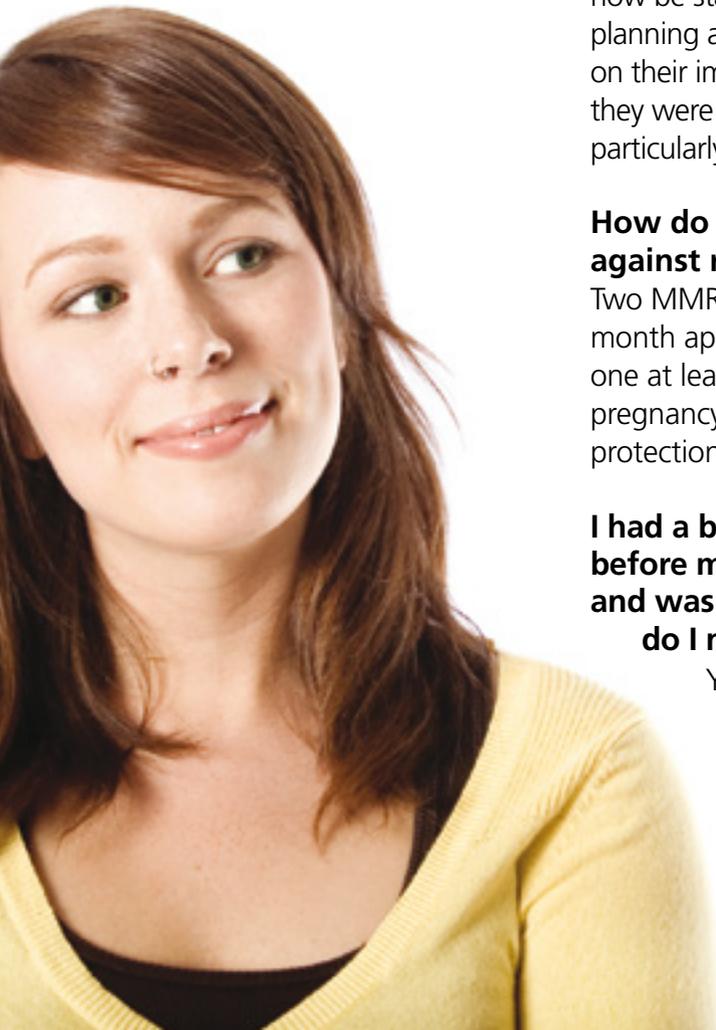
Rubella caught in the first ten weeks of pregnancy causes damage to nine out of ten unborn babies. The mother passes the virus on to her unborn baby and it damages the organs as they develop, particularly the developing eyes, ears, heart and brain – often in combination.

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.

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 one month apart and with the second one at least a month before pregnancy will offer excellent protection against the disease.

### **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 you should make sure that you have had 2 doses of MMR.

This will ensure you are protected against measles and mumps as well as rubella.

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

If you are planning to have a baby or might get pregnant, speak to your doctor to arrange to have two MMR immunisations, if you need them, as soon as possible.

You should also check with your doctor if you need any other vaccines.

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

# DURING

your pregnancy

**I'm pregnant and I have not had the MMR vaccination. What should 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 women who missed out on their MMR vaccinations are still at risk. These people could spread rubella so you need to be aware. 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 two doses of MMR so you're protected next time you get pregnant. The first vaccination will probably be given when you visit your GP when your baby is six weeks old.

### **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 someone I know has a rash which could be rubella, what should I do?**

Try to avoid further contact until your vaccination history is confirmed (you've already



had your two doses of MMR in the past) or your friend's illness is 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 another week. Speak to your doctor or midwife for further advice.

### **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 or midwife 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 realised I hadn't had my two doses of MMR, what should I do now?**

After you've had your baby, you should have the two vaccinations so you're protected next time you get pregnant.

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

You will be invited to immunise your child with the MMR vaccine soon after their first birthday and again before they start school. Older children and adults who have missed out can be vaccinated too.

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

Yes – the baby is not at risk.

## 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 one year 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 to be protected against measles, mumps and rubella.

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.



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2900955 1p Jan18 (APS)

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