

Rheumatic fever

Information for whānau

Rheumatic fever is a serious illness that can cause major damage to your heart. A sore throat is often the first warning sign.

Because you live with someone who has rheumatic fever you have a higher risk of getting it too. Contact your doctor if anyone in your whānau aged between three and 35 develops a sore throat or skin infection. Seek health advice every time this happens, as the infection that causes rheumatic fever can keep coming back.

What is rheumatic fever?

Rheumatic fever is a serious illness. It mostly affects people aged between three and 35 years old. A sore throat is often the first warning sign.

Rheumatic fever can:

- damage a child's heart
- cause pain in knees, ankles, elbows or other joints
- cause unusual hand or arm movements.

If your child gets rheumatic fever, it may cause permanent damage to their heart valves. This is called rheumatic heart disease. People with rheumatic fever need to have antibiotic injections every four weeks for at least 10 years, to help protect their heart. Sometimes people with rheumatic fever end up needing heart surgery.

What causes rheumatic fever

Rheumatic fever is caused by a germ called group A streptococci or "strep".

This germ can live in your throat without you having any symptoms, but in some people it can cause a sore throat or a throat infection (known as strep throat). The germ can also cause skin infections.

Sometimes people with strep throat or skin infections go on to develop rheumatic fever.

Seeking health advice

If you or anyone in your whānau aged between 3 and 35 years old has a sore throat or skin infection contact your GP or health provider.

The doctor may carry out tests and you or your whānau may be given a course of antibiotic medicine. The medicine can help prevent you or others in your whānau from developing rheumatic fever.

A child can get rheumatic fever more than once, so it's important to get sore throats and skin infections checked every time they occur.

Preventing rheumatic fever

Rheumatic fever can spread easily in families, especially when there are lots of people living and sleeping in the same rooms.

However, there are steps you can take to reduce the risk of rheumatic fever spreading:

- Avoid sharing drink bottles, food or knives and forks, or pre-chewing your baby's food. This can pass strep germs from one

person to another.

- Avoid preparing food for others while unwell or if you have a skin infection, if possible.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, throw away the tissue afterwards, and wash and dry your hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- If possible, avoid having multiple people sleep in the same rooms or share beds.

Symptoms and complications

A sore throat is the main symptom of strep throat. In children signs of a sore throat can include them finding it hard to swallow, or having trouble eating or drinking.

If you have a skin infection from the strep germ it may cause:

- itchy red skin with blisters that crust and scab (usually around the nose, mouth or legs), or
- redness, warmth, swelling and tenderness or painful skin.

Not everyone who gets strep throat or a strep skin infection develops rheumatic fever.

Those who develop rheumatic fever tend to have the following symptoms, around one to five weeks after having a sore throat:

- sore joints are the most common symptom of rheumatic fever. This includes the hip,

knees, elbows, ankles and wrists.

Different joints may be sore on different days. Sore joints may cause a limp or difficulty walking due to pain.

- joints may be red, swollen and feel hot.
- shortness of breath — they may feel short of breath more easily than usual when they are active.
- a rash.
- small painless lumps under the skin over the elbows, wrists, knees, ankles or spine.
- unusual jerky movements of their hands, feet, tongue and face. This can look like fidgeting or being unable to sit still, and can affect their handwriting. The movements stop during sleep.

Over time, most of these symptoms will go away. But, heart damage can be permanent.

Tamariki and rangatahi may also have:

- tummy pains
- weight loss
- extreme tiredness
- an ongoing fever at or greater than 38° C that lasts a few days.

For more information

For health advice contact your doctor. You can also call Healthline for free anytime on 0800 611 116. Healthline has interpreters for those who need one.

For more information on rheumatic fever visit: info.health.nz/rheumatic-fever