What is rubella?
Rubella is a mild but very contagious viral disease that is preventable with a vaccine. The other name for rubella is German measles. Rubella is found worldwide. Anyone can get rubella, but unvaccinated, school-aged children are most at risk.

Rubella is dangerous because infection of a pregnant woman can harm the unborn baby and result in the congenital rubella syndrome (see below, What complications can result from rubella).

How do people get rubella?
People get rubella by breathing in droplets that become airborne when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. Rubella can also spread by direct contact with fluids from the nose or throat of an infected person.

What are the signs and symptoms of rubella?
Most cases of rubella are mild. About half the people infected with rubella virus get a rash that looks like small, fine pink spots. The rash first appears on the face and progresses from head to foot, lasting about 3 days. Children usually develop few or no other symptoms. Adults can have mild fever, headache, reddened eyes, swollen glands behind the ears, tiredness, and joint pain.

An infected person can spread the disease for as many as 7 days before the rash appears to 7 days after. Infectious children should not attend school or day care.

In most cases, symptoms appear within 16 to 18 days. Diagnosis is by blood test for antibodies or rubella virus identification.

What complications can result from rubella?
Rubella is not usually a serious disease in children, but it can be very serious if a pregnant woman becomes infected. When a woman gets rubella during pregnancy, especially during the first 3 months, the infection is likely to spread to the foetus and cause congenital rubella syndrome (CRS).

Between 20% - 90% of the infants born to mothers infected with rubella during the first 3 months of pregnancy have congenital rubella syndrome. This can result in miscarriage, stillbirth and severe birth defects. The most common birth defects are blindness, deafness, heart damage, and mental retardation. Defects are rare if the mother is infected after the 20th week of pregnancy.

What is the treatment for rubella?
There is no treatment for rubella. The illness usually runs its course in a few days.

How common are rubella and congenital rubella syndrome?
Since the rubella vaccine was introduced cases of rubella and congenital rubella syndrome in New Zealand have remained low. Less than 40 cases of rubella were notified annually in New Zealand between 2000 – 2005 (less than 1 per 100,000 population).

In unvaccinated populations, rubella is primarily a childhood disease. When children are well immunized, adolescent and adult infections become more evident.

How can rubella be prevented?
Rubella (and congenital rubella syndrome) are prevented by immunisation. The rubella vaccine is part of the two dose MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine given during childhood.

- All children should be vaccinated to protect themselves and others from rubella.
- To help protect unborn babies from congenital rubella syndrome, women must be immune to rubella before they become pregnant. Reproductive-aged women should find out their immune status to rubella and receive rubella vaccine if needed. Usually, a blood test will be done during pregnancy to determine if a woman is protected against rubella. Any pregnant woman who has been exposed to rubella should be referred to her health-care provider.