



## Children's Health

# Rheumatic Fever

### WHAT IS IT?

Rheumatic fever can affect children 6 to 8 years old. Once a common complication caused by a particular strain of the bacteria streptococcus, it has nearly disappeared since the use of antibiotics to treat throat infections. In some areas, however, the disease is making a comeback.

Some components of the streptococcal bacteria are genetically similar to certain tissues in the body. The immune system produces antibodies to fight a throat infection, and these antibodies attack the connective tissues in the heart, joints or other organs. A complication, or end result of rheumatic fever a few years or decades after its occurrence, is rheumatic heart disease. This disease causes the heart's valves to become damaged or deformed.

### HOW RHEUMATIC FEVER IS TREATED

Antibiotics used with aspirin or steroids, along with bed rest, may be prescribed. Although rare, acute rheumatic fever can cause heart failure and death. It most often requires hospitalization. Because of treatment with antibiotics, recurrence of the disease is rare. However, the risk of valvular heart disease is increased. Following treatment, frequent checkups to monitor valve damage may be necessary.

### PREVENTION

Pay close attention when a child develops a sore throat. If it persists more than 24 hours and is accompanied by a fever, consult your child's doctor. A throat culture will detect the streptococcal bacteria and appropriate antibiotics can be prescribed. In many cases this will be penicillin.

### SYMPTOMS OF RHEUMATIC FEVER

- inflammation of the heart*
- arthritis that migrates from one joint to another*
- uncontrolled movement of limbs and face*
- raised, red patches on the skin  
(this rash will have rounded borders)*
- lumps under the skin*
- joint aches without inflammation*
- fever*
- abnormal heartbeat*
- weakness*
- shortness of breath*
- fatigue*

