



Music Unlocked

Group A Streptococcus supplement

Group A Streptococcus is a common bacterium which is carried asymptotically by anywhere between 5% and 30% of the population in the UK. It lives happily and mostly harmlessly in the throat and on the skin and when it causes illness it is usually fairly minor, albeit not pleasant.

In some cases however, Strep A can cause more serious illnesses, namely scarlet fever and invasive Group A Streptococcus (iGAS). Both these infections are notifiable to the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA). The eight children who have died in the UK since September have died of iGAS.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, notifiable Strep A infections were very low. Since lockdowns and other restrictions have been lifted, levels have increased; moreover the current peaks for both scarlet fever and iGAS are approximately three months later this year than in 2018 (see [here](#)).

Spread

Infection is spread by close contact between individuals, either through respiratory droplets or direct skin-to-skin contact. It is also possible to spread it through handling contaminated objects (fomites) or sharing food with a carrier.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/group-a-streptococcal-infections-guidance-and-data>

Catching coughs and sneezes in a tissue and disposing of it safely and washing hands thoroughly and frequently will help to control spread. People are infectious when they show symptoms, so staying away from people who feel or appear to be unwell will help to reduce risk.

This is not another pandemic

Group A Strep infections are well known to medical science. Like Covid-19, Strep A is easily spread, some people carry it asymptotically but a small minority of cases are serious and even deadly. Unlike Covid-19 however, it is a bacteriological infection and the vast majority of cases can be treated successfully with common (and cheap) antibiotics.

We are in a post-pandemic peak for both scarlet fever and iGAS however numbers are not all that dissimilar to previous seasonal highs and are [considerably below the levels seen in 2017/18](#). Although this could of course change, at present it is a consideration but not an emergency.

Music and Group A Streptococcus

There appears to be no specific research on Strep A infections as a result of musical activity. At the time of writing, no musical activities have been identified as super-spreader events (there is yet to be a Skagit Valley or an Amsterdam St John Passion for Strep A) and there is no saying that such an event will necessarily emerge.

Actions for music education organisations and school music leads

There is a close correlation between Strep A infection levels and the imposition of Covid restrictions. In the light of this and of what is known about Strep A transmission, it is reasonable to conclude that similar control measures will be effective.

Music Mark recommends revisiting Covid risk assessments and updating them to include control measures for Group A Streptococcus. As for Covid, the most effective control measures are likely to be:

- Ventilating spaces appropriately;
- Matching numbers participating to the space available;
- Taking steps to reduce aerosol production, i.e. singing and playing blown instruments at lower volumes and for limited time;
- No sharing of blown instruments;
- Using puppy pads or newspaper to soak up water venting from brass instruments;
- Employing good hand hygiene.

Local guidance on public gatherings should be followed for performances.

As we saw previously, these measures will help control the transmission of a number of infections as well as Strep A, including Covid-19, flu, coughs and common colds.

While fomite transmission is possible, there is no suggestion at this time that books or paper cannot be shared.

Guidance

At present there is limited advice and there are no restrictions on activities anywhere in the UK. Note that none of the public health agencies or NHS authorities in the UK make any mention of singing or blown instruments in current advice.

England

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukhsa-update-on-scarlet-fever-and-invasive-group-a-strep>

Wales

[https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/s/article/streptococcusa\(strepa\)/](https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/s/article/streptococcusa(strepa)/)

Scotland

<https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/a-to-z-of-topics/streptococcal-infections/group-a-streptococcal-infections/>

(refers to the [Public Health England page](#))

Northern Ireland

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/public-urged-be-alert-signs-group-strep>

links to their [scarlet fever page](#)

All links checked on 06th December 2022.