



Measles Frequently Asked Questions

What is measles?

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease that causes fever and a rash.

Who gets measles?

Anyone who is not vaccinated can get measles at any age.

How is measles spread?

Measles is spread by contact with an infected person, through coughing and sneezing. The virus resides in the infected person's nose and throat mucus. When that person sneezes or coughs, droplets spray into the air. The infected mucus can land in other people's noses or throats when they breathe or put their fingers in their mouth or nose after touching an infected surface. The virus remains active and contagious on infected surfaces for up to two hours.

The disease is highly contagious. If one person has it, 90% of that person's close contacts will also become infected.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Early symptoms of measles include fever (which can reach 103 to 105 degrees F), cough, runny nose, sore throat and red, watery eyes. Two to three days later, little white spots called Koplik spots may appear on the gums and inside of the cheeks, although they are rarely seen. Three to five days after symptoms start, a rash of red spots appears on the face and then spreads over the entire body.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 10-12 days after exposure to an infected person; symptoms may start as early as 7 days or as late as 21 days after exposure.

When can a person with measles spread it to others?

A person can spread measles from four days before to four days after the appearance of the rash.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Yes. Infection makes a person immune for the rest of his or her life.

Is there a vaccine to prevent measles?

Yes. Measles vaccine is given on or after a child's first birthday. It is combined with mumps and rubella vaccines into one vaccine called MMR (measles-mumps-rubella). A second dose of MMR vaccine is recommended before children enter school at 4 to 6 years of age. Anyone who has received two valid doses of a measles-containing vaccine is considered immune and protected from getting measles. For information on where you or your child can get vaccinated, please call 311.

What is the treatment for measles?

There is no specific medicine to treat the measles virus. Treatment may be given for the symptoms of measles.

Can measles cause other health problems?

About one third of reported measles cases have at least one complication. Health problems caused by measles can include diarrhea, ear infections, pneumonia, seizures and infections of the brain and nervous system. In some cases, measles can cause death. In pregnant women, measles can cause miscarriages and premature labor. Measles is more severe in infants, pregnant women, people whose immune systems are weak and those aged 20 and older.

How can measles be prevented?

The best way to prevent measles is with vaccination. Anyone born after January 1, 1957, who has not received two doses of a measles-containing vaccine or does not have a blood test proving that he or she is already immune to measles, should receive two doses of MMR vaccine (the measles, mumps, rubella combination vaccine). All children enrolled in pre-kindergarten and daycare programs are required to receive one dose of the measles vaccine. Children enrolled in school and college/university students must have two doses of measles vaccine. Health care workers are required to receive two doses of a measles-containing vaccine or have a blood test showing that they are immune.

Does the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine work?

More than 95% of people who get a single dose of MMR vaccine (the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella) will be immune to all three viruses. A second vaccine dose gives immunity to almost all of those who did not respond to the first dose.

Is the measles vaccine safe?

Most people who receive the MMR vaccine do not have any side effects. Some people experience mild side effects like fever, mild rash or swelling of glands in the cheeks or neck. Severe problems are very rare. For more information about MMR vaccine, visit Immunization Action Coalition: Vaccine Information Statements at http://www.immunize.org/vis/vis_mmr.asp

For more information on where your child can be vaccinated, call 311.

Where can I get more information about measles or the MMR vaccine?

Visit these online resources:

Measles (Immunization Action Coalition): <http://www.vaccineinformation.org/measles/>

Measles Overview (Centers for Disease Control): <http://www.cdc.gov/measles/>