

Measles (Rubeola)

What is measles?

Measles, also called rubeola, is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus. The measles virus spreads easily and can cause serious complications to a person's health. Long-standing vaccination efforts have kept measles from being widespread in the United States, but outbreaks can and do still occur. When vaccination rates within communities are low or drop, the risk of having an outbreak increases. Measles is common in many parts of the world and can also be brought into the U.S. by unvaccinated travelers. Maintaining high vaccination coverage is essential to protect people and communities from outbreaks.

What are the symptoms of measles?

- Rash, AND
- Fever, AND
- Cough OR runny nose OR watery/mattering eyes.

Symptoms appear about eight to 12 days after a person is exposed to measles. The first symptom is usually fever. The rash usually appears two to three days after the fever begins and lasts five to six days. The rash begins at the hairline, moves to the face and upper neck, and then down the body.

If you or your child has symptoms of measles, what should you do?

Be sure to stay at home and avoid having visitors until you have talked with your doctor or clinic. Your doctor or clinic will tell you if you should come in for a visit.

How serious is measles?

Measles can be a serious disease that can lead to hospitalization and even death. Many people with measles have complications like diarrhea, ear infections, pneumonia, or acute encephalitis (a brain infection that can lead to permanent brain damage). Complications are more common in children under 5 years of age and adults older than 20.

Measles during pregnancy increases the risk of premature labor, miscarriage, and low birth weight infants. Measles can be especially severe in persons whose immune systems are weak.

How does measles spread?

Measles is spread through the air when people who have it breathe and cough. It is highly contagious. You cannot get measles more than once, because after you have had it, you are immune.

How long is a person with measles contagious?

A person with measles can pass it to others from four days before their rash appears to four days after it appears.

Is there a treatment for measles?

No, there is no specific treatment for measles. People with measles need bed rest, fluids, and control of fever. They may also need treatment for complications such as diarrhea, ear infection, or pneumonia.

Is there a vaccine for measles?

Yes. The measles vaccination is usually combined with mumps and rubella (MMR).

- Children get MMR doses at 12-15 months and at 4-6 years of age; the second MMR may be given as soon as a month after the first dose.
- An early dose of MMR is recommended for children 6-12 months of age who will be traveling internationally or where outbreaks are occurring.
- Adults who have not had measles or measles vaccine should receive one dose of MMR vaccine, particularly if they were born in 1957 or later.
- Students (including college students), health care workers, and international travelers need to have received two doses of MMR vaccine, if they have not, they should get vaccinated.
- Talk to your health care provider if you have questions about what vaccines you or your child needs.

If you or your child has been exposed to measles, what should you do?

- Call your doctor or clinic right away. They will let you know if you need to come in for a visit.
- If you have not been vaccinated, getting an MMR shot within three days of being exposed may prevent them from getting measles.
- If you get a shot of immune globulin (a blood product with antibodies to the measles virus) within six days of being exposed to measles, it may prevent or lessen the severity of measles.

What if there is a case of measles in a school or other setting (e.g., summer camp, child care, worksite, clinic)?

MDH and the local health departments will work with the setting to identify people who may have been exposed, assess their immunity to measles, and recommend post-exposure prophylaxis as needed for that particular situation.

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