

Measles General Information

What is measles?

Measles, also known as Red Measles or Rubeola, is a serious disease caused by a virus. It is spread very easily through the air when someone with measles coughs or sneezes, and by direct contact with infected nose or throat secretions.

Who can get measles?

Anyone who has been in close contact with someone who has measles can get the disease. The chance of getting measles is reduced if you have been immunized against measles.

Once someone has had measles they are considered protected for life. Most people born before 1970 likely had measles as a child and are considered to be immune. Anyone born after 1970 that has never had measles and has not had 2 measles vaccines is at risk.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms start about 10 days after a person is infected with the virus. Infants and adults are usually sicker than children and teenagers.

Symptoms include:

- fever
- runny nose
- red watery eyes, often sensitive to light
- conjunctivitis (pink eye)
- cough
- small, white spots may appear on the inside of the mouth (Koplik spots)
- rash that starts on the face and neck and then spreads

Measles usually starts with a fever, cough, runny nose and red, puffy, watery eyes. Small white spots may be seen in the mouth. A few days later, a red rash appears on the face and head, and then spreads over the rest of the body. The rash lasts 4 to 7 days.

What are the complications?

Most people recover from measles. Measles can cause serious complications in 20% of cases, including ear infections, pneumonia, encephalitis (swelling or inflammation of the brain), seizures, and deafness. In Canada, measles causes death in approximately 1 out of every 3,000 cases.

What is the treatment?

There is no treatment for measles. Sometimes the measles vaccine is given to people who have been in contact with a person with measles. If the vaccine is given early enough, it may prevent the person from getting the disease. If you have been in contact with someone

you know has measles, call your doctor or Public Health right away. If you suspect that you have measles, advise your doctor or healthcare provider before you visit their office.

Should pregnant women worry about the measles?

When measles occurs in pregnant women, the illness is generally not any more severe than in other women. However, measles infection during pregnancy has an increased risk of premature labour, miscarriage, and low birth weight infants. There is no evidence that measles during pregnancy causes birth defects.

How can you prevent measles?

The best way to prevent measles is to make sure that you and your children have been vaccinated. Children should have the measles vaccine at 1 year of age, and again before they enter school. The vaccine is given at the same time as the mumps and rubella vaccine. Avoid close contact with someone who has measles if you have not had measles or measles vaccine. Generally, measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine should not be given during pregnancy, as there may be a risk to the fetus. To date, there is no proof that this vaccine actually causes harm to a fetus. Immune Globulin (IG) is recommended for pregnant women who have not had measles or measles vaccine. IG is given by needle and can provide quick, short-term protection against measles, or reduces the severity of illness of those who become ill. The MMR vaccine is safe for breastfeeding mothers and their babies. You can still get MMR vaccine if you are in close contact or live with a pregnant woman.

What should I do if I think I have measles?

Limit contact with others until you speak with a healthcare provider. Do not go to school, work, or any public places. Do not take part in social activities. Call your healthcare provider immediately. Tell them that you may have measles and make an appointment. It is important you are seen and that proper testing is done. If you are diagnosed with measles, you should stay home from work, school, public places and other social settings. Avoid close contact with others until the end of the 4th day after the rash appears. The illness can be spread to others from 4 days before to 4 days after the start of the rash. To avoid spreading disease:

- wash your hands often or use hand sanitizer
- do not share drinking glasses or eating utensils
- cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your elbow
- stay home when you are sick
- make sure your vaccines are up to date

Useful websites:

- Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness & Promotion immunize.ca
- Public Health Agency of Canada phac-aspc.gc.ca
- Canadian Paediatric Society cps.ca