

Measles

What is measles (red measles, rubeola)?

Measles is a virus that easily spreads from person to person and causes an infection of the lungs (respiratory system). It is rarely seen in Canada because most people are vaccinated against it.

What are the symptoms of measles?

The measles virus causes a fever, rash, cough, red watery eyes and a runny nose. The red rash starts on the face and spreads to the rest of the body. Most people with measles are sick for up to 10 days and then recover completely. Symptoms are more severe for infants and adults. Measles can infect the ears, lungs (pneumonia) and brain (encephalitis) and can cause death. Pregnant women with measles can have premature delivery and miscarriages. Measles does not cause birth defects.

How can I get measles?

Measles spreads easily from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes, spreading droplets that contain the virus into the air. Less commonly, these droplets can stay in the air for long periods of time and infect others in the same room.

When is someone with measles contagious?

People infected with measles can spread it to others 4 days before to 4 days after the rash appears.

Who is at risk of getting measles?

Anyone born on or after January 1st 1970 who is not vaccinated and who has never had measles infection is at risk. People born before January 1st 1970 likely had measles when they were young and are considered protected. Infants under the age of 1 are most at risk because measles vaccine is not given until children are 1 year of age or older.

If I have been in contact with someone who had measles, how long before I can get symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear 10 days after contact with an infected individual but can range from 7 to 21 days. The rash usually appears 14 days after exposure.

Can I get measles more than once?

No. Once someone has had measles they are protected for life.

How do I know if I have measles now or was infected in the past?

Your healthcare provider can tell you if you have measles now based on your symptoms. They can also order laboratory tests that will show if you have the virus now or were exposed in the past.

How is measles treated?

There is no specific treatment for measles. Supportive care in a hospital may be needed for severe infections, but most people can recover at home. If you think you have measles, call your doctor before visiting their office so they can take steps to prevent the virus from spreading.

Fact Sheet

What can I do to prevent measles?

For those born on or after January 1st 1970, vaccination is the best way to prevent infection.

What is the measles vaccine?

Measles vaccine comes in two types, MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine or MMRV (measles, mumps, rubella and chickenpox) vaccine. Two doses provide over 95 percent protection against measles. Vaccination also makes the symptoms of measles milder if you get the virus.

Who should get measles vaccine?

Everyone born on or after January 1st 1970, especially students at colleges and universities, military recruits, healthcare workers and travelers to areas where measles is more common, should get 2 doses (MMR or MMRV) at least 28 days apart. Children in Ontario receive their first measles vaccine at 12 months of age (MMR). The second is given before school entry between 4 and 6 years of age as MMRV. Talk to your healthcare provider for more information.

What can I do if I come into contact with someone who has measles?

To protect yourself from getting measles, you can:

- Get the measles vaccine if you can get it within 72 hours of contact with an infected person.
- Get an immunoglobulin injection, for those at high risk of serious illness, if you can get it within 6 days of coming into contact with an infected person. Immunoglobulin is a blood product containing antibodies that help prevent infection. It is usually given to people who are at risk of severe complications from measles, such as infants, pregnant women and those with a weakened immune system.

Is measles vaccine safe?

Yes. Most people will have no side effects. Serious side effects from the vaccine are very rare. Side effects are less common after the second dose of the vaccine.

Who should not get measles vaccine?

The MMR or MMRV vaccine should not be given if you:

- Have high fever or a serious infection more severe than a cold. It is better to wait until you recover before getting either vaccine.
- Are pregnant, think you may be pregnant or are trying to become pregnant.
- Have a severe allergy to a previous dose of MMR or MMRV or any component of these vaccines including gelatin or an antibiotic called neomycin.
- Have recently received a blood product (e.g. serum immune globulin). You should wait 3 to 12 months before getting vaccinated depending upon which blood product you received.
- Have had a live vaccine (e.g. chickenpox vaccine) in the last 28 days. You should wait 28 days before getting measles vaccine.
- Have a weakened immune system that lowers the body's ability to fight infections (such as HIV, cancer or taking certain medications). Speak with your healthcare provider.

Where can I get more information?

For more information about measles call Toronto Public Health at 416-338-7600, TTY 416-392-0658.