

Measles (Red Measles)



What is Measles?

Measles is a respiratory disease caused by a highly contagious virus. It is also called Rubeola or Red Measles. It is a virus that is easily spread through the air, from person to person, through breathing, coughing or sneezing. Measles is the leading cause of vaccine preventable deaths in children worldwide. Those most severely affected by the disease include people suffering from malnutrition, pregnant women and those with a weakened immune system. Canada has experienced an increased incidence of measles in 2013/2014 due to travel importation and low immunization rates in some communities.

What are the symptoms?

- Measles begins with cold-like symptoms such as a runny nose, cough, sore throat, fever, and red, watery eyes that are sensitive to light
- Small white spots sometimes appear in the mouth and back of the throat
- 3–7 days later, a red blotchy rash appears on the face and spreads to the rest of the body
- The rash lasts 4–7 days
- Serious complications can occur such as:
 - One in ten children will develop an ear infection or bronchopneumonia
 - One in one thousand children will develop an infection of the brain (encephalitis)
 - One or two out of a thousand children will die as a result of measles

How is the illness spread?

If you come in contact with someone who has measles, you could develop symptoms about 7–21 days later. Transmission can occur if you have shared the same room or airspace with a person who has measles. The person is contagious from four days before the rash begins until four days after the rash has appeared.

The virus can remain in the environment for up to two hours after the infected person has left the area. If you have been exposed, you are at risk of developing the disease. Being exposed to measles without adequate immunization will probably lead to illness. You should contact a physician or public health unit to discuss your options if you have been exposed. In some circumstances immunization after exposure can help prevent infection.

How can I prevent this infection?

Immunization against measles is almost 100% effective in preventing the illness in children who are fully immunized. Current Ontario recommendations are that children receive two doses of the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine:

- First dose on/after their first birthday
- Second dose at 4–6 years old
- For some infants 6–12 months of age, administration of one dose of the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine can provide protection if there is a risk of exposure

Adult recommendations include the following:

- People born **before 1970**, are considered naturally immune because of prior exposure to measles
- People born **in 1970 or later**, should have one dose of the vaccine
- A second dose of MMR is recommended for young adults, post secondary students, health care workers and those who plan to travel internationally

What should I do if I think I may have been exposed to measles?

- Stay home if you are ill to avoid passing germs to others
- Seek medical attention when exposure is suspected and before any symptoms appear
- Those who notice possible symptoms are asked to stay home and call ahead before visiting a clinic
- Those who have been exposed and are not protected can be given a vaccine within three days of exposure that can prevent measles
- If those who have been exposed are not protected are either pregnant, Immunocompromised or less than six months of age, they can be given another medication up to six days after exposure

Where can I find more information?

For further information, ask your health care provider or contact the Region of Waterloo Public Health Infectious Diseases Information Line listed below.



Face of boy with measles; third day of rash.

Image source: <http://phil.cdc.gov/phil/details.asp?pid=1150>

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Infectious Diseases Program

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