

Measles (Rubeola)

What is measles?

Measles is a severe illness caused by a virus. It is spread from person to person very easily and can produce outbreaks of illness. Before the vaccine became available, more than 90 percent of children under 20 years of age had been infected with measles. Now the disease is not very common in the United States.

Who gets measles?

Although measles is usually considered a childhood disease, people of any age can catch it. In the U.S. most cases are in pre-school children, teenagers, young adults, and individuals who are not fully immunized. Adults at increased risk include college students, international travelers, and healthcare personnel.

How is the virus spread?

Measles is one of the most contagious diseases. The measles virus is spread through the air or by direct contact with nose or throat discharges from someone who is infected.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Measles symptoms usually appear in two stages. In the first stage, most people have a fever, runny nose, redness of the eye(s), and cough. The second stage begins around the third to seventh day when a red blotchy rash begins to appear on the face and spread over the entire body. Little white spots, called Koplik spots, may also be seen on the gums and inside of the cheeks.

What are the complications associated with measles?

Middle ear infections, pneumonia, diarrhea, and encephalitis (infection of the brain) may occur in a small percentage of cases but death due to measles is very rare in the United States. Measles is more severe in young infants and adults.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may begin within 7 to 21 days after exposure, with an average of 10 days. The rash usually appears within 14 days of exposure.

How long is someone contagious?

A person can spread the disease from just before the onset of the fever to about four days after the appearance of the rash. Therefore, it is important to keep children out of school until at least four days after the rash develops.

What is the treatment for measles?

Treatment focuses on relief of symptoms as the body fights the virus. This may include fluids, medications to control fever or pain, antibiotics to treat secondary infections from bacteria, and vitamin A supplements.

Can a person who had measles get it again?

No. Persons who have had measles do not get it again.

How can measles be prevented?

Immunization of as many children as possible is the best way to prevent measles cases and outbreaks. Two doses of measles vaccine are recommended for all children. The first dose of the measles, mumps, rubella vaccine (MMR) should be given at 12-15 months of age and the second dose before a child enters kindergarten (4-6 years of age). Generally, anyone 18 years of age or older and who was born after 1956 should get at least one dose of MMR vaccine, unless they can show that they have been vaccinated or had the diseases.

A person with measles should stay away from school, daycare, or other settings where others could be exposed until at least four days after the rash appears.