

Measles

Your questions answered

What is measles?

Measles is a very contagious disease that usually lasts one to two weeks. Measles often causes ear infections and pneumonia. Deafness, blindness and seizure disorders are less common. Although rare, it may also cause swelling of the brain and death. Measles is most dangerous for infants, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems.

How is measles transmitted?

Measles is very contagious. It is spread when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks and other people nearby inhale the virus. Touching tissues or sharing a cup used by someone who has measles can also spread it. People with measles can spread the disease starting four days before until four days after the rash begins. Initial symptoms appear on average 10–14 days after a person is exposed.

What are the symptoms?

A cough, high fever, runny nose and red, watery eyes are common initial symptoms. A few days later, a red blotchy rash starts on the face and then spreads to the rest of the body.

How serious is measles?

Measles itself is unpleasant, but the complications are dangerous. Six to 20 percent of the people who get the disease will get an ear infection, diarrhea or even pneumonia. One out of 1,000 people with measles will develop inflammation of the brain and about one out of 1,000 will die.

Who gets measles?

Widespread use of measles vaccine has led to a greater than 99 percent reduction in measles cases in the United States compared with the pre-vaccine era. However, measles is still common in other countries, and measles is still seen among visitors to the United States and among U.S. travelers returning from other countries. The measles viruses these travelers bring into the U.S. sometimes cause outbreaks among certain groups, including:

- Anyone who never had measles and has never been vaccinated.
- Babies < 12 months old, because they are too young to be vaccinated.
- Adults who were vaccinated before 1968, because some early vaccines did not give lasting protection.

How is measles diagnosed?

Because measles can look like other rash causing diseases, the only sure test for measles is a blood test.

What Can **YOU** Do?

How can you prevent measles?

- Protect your children by having them vaccinated when they are 12-15 months old, and again when they are about to enter kindergarten. Measles vaccine is usually given in an immunization called MMR, which protects against mumps and rubella as well.
- If you have been exposed to measles, talk to your doctor or nurse right away to see if you need a vaccination. If you get the vaccine less than three days (72 hours) after being exposed, it will help protect you against measles. People who cannot be vaccinated can be treated with immune globulin (IG) up to six days after exposure. IG may not prevent measles, but it does make the disease milder.
- People with measles should be kept away from people who are not immune until they are well again.

Is the MMR vaccine safe?

Yes, it is safe for most people. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing problems like fever, mild rash, temporary pain or stiffness in the joints, and allergic reactions. More severe problems are very rare. Getting MMR vaccine is much safer than getting measles and most people do not have any problems with it.

Are there any health regulations to prevent measles?

State regulations do require every student enrolled or enrolling in a Kansas school to have proof of two doses of measles vaccine (MMR). If a case is reported at a school or child care setting, any persons at risk of becoming ill from measles, including those children with immunization exemptions, will be excluded from the school or childcare setting until 21 days after the onset of the last reported illness in the setting. If the person at risk for measles disease is immunized or shows proof of immunization within 24 hours of a case being reported, the exclusion will not be needed. Regulations also require that anyone who has measles be isolated until four days after the rash appears. That means they must be kept away from public places like daycare centers, school and work.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have an infection, consult with your health care provider.

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This fact sheet is based on the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's disease fact sheets.

For more information on measles, call the
Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department at
(785) 843-0721 or visit us on the web at: www.ldchealth.org