

Measles (Rubeola)

What is measles?

Measles is a highly contagious disease that is caused by the measles virus. It is also known as rubeola, seven-day measles, hard measles, or old-fashioned measles. Measles presents as a high fever and a red blotchy rash starting on the face that spreads to the rest of the body.



Image courtesy of CDC

What are the symptoms of measles?

Symptoms of measles begin to appear about 7 to 14 days after a person is infected, but can be as long as 21 days.

Most cases start with a mild to moderate fever, cough, runny nose, red eyes, and sore throat. About three to five days later, a red rash appears. The rash begins at the hairline, then spreads down to the rest of the body. When the rash appears, the fever may be as high as 103°F to 105°F. Other symptoms may include Koplik's spots (tiny white spots with bluish-white centers in the mouth), and feeling run down or achy. Symptoms may last for one to two weeks. If you think you have symptoms of measles, contact your healthcare provider or county health department immediately.

What are the complications of measles?

Persons with measles can also develop diarrhea, ear infections, and/or pneumonia. In certain cases, encephalitis (swelling of the brain) or death can occur. It is most dangerous for children under five years of age, adults over 20 years of age, pregnant women, and persons with weakened immune systems.

How is measles spread, and how long can you spread measles to others?

Measles is passed from person-to-person by airborne droplets through coughing or sneezing. Measles can also be spread by contact with nose or throat secretions from ill persons, or touching a contaminated surface. Infected people can spread the virus four days before their rash starts to four days after. If you think you have been exposed to measles, please contact your healthcare provider or your county health department.

Is there a treatment for measles?

There is no treatment for measles. However, healthcare providers may treat the symptoms of measles with bed rest, plenty of fluids, and anti-fever medications.

How can I prevent myself and my family from getting measles?

Measles can be prevented by the measles vaccine (usually given in combination with rubella and mumps vaccines, or MMR vaccine), and is recommended for all children at 12 to 15 months of age and again at four to six years of age. If a person has not received a second dose of the vaccine between four and six years of age, it may be given at any age thereafter. The two doses of vaccine normally provide lifelong immunity.

Is the measles vaccine safe?

Yes, MMR is safe and effective in preventing measles. However, like other medicines, it can cause side effects in some persons. Contact your local healthcare provider or your county health department for more information about the vaccine.