

Fact Sheet

Measles

What is measles?

Measles (also called red measles or rubeola) is a serious disease caused by a virus. It is rarely seen in Canada because most people are vaccinated against it.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Measles usually starts with a fever, cough, runny nose and red, puffy, watery eyes (often sensitive to light). Small, white spots may be seen in the mouth. A few days later, a red rash appears on the face and head, and then spreads to the rest of the body. The rash usually lasts 4 to 7 days.

Symptoms usually start about 10 days after a person is infected with the virus. Symptoms can be more serious in babies 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 is it spread?

Measles is one of the most contagious diseases known, and spreads easily from person to person by drops of fluid from the nose and throat of someone who has the disease (like when they cough or sneeze). The infected person spreads the disease the most from 4 days before to 4 days after the start of the rash.

Who is at risk?

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

What is the treatment?

There is no treatment for measles and most people can get better at home. People who get seriously sick should contact their health care provider.

The measles vaccine is sometimes given to people who have been in contact with someone with measles. If it is given early enough, the vaccine may prevent them from getting the disease. If you have been in contact with someone who has measles, speak to your health care provider.

How can measles be prevented?

- For those born after 1970, vaccination is the best way to prevent measles. Speak with your health care provider to make sure that you and your family have completed your measles vaccination.
- Hand washing is the best way to prevent all types of infection. Hand washing, especially after coughing and sneezing, and before and after caring for a sick person, will help prevent the spread of germs.
- Try not to share food, drinks, cigarettes or eating utensils, and toothbrushes.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your elbow.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Make sure you have all your immunizations before you travel outside of Canada.