



# Measles

## What is measles?

Measles (red measles) is a severe illness caused by the measles virus.

Measles can cause serious illness such as inflammation of the brain (encephalitis), which can lead to convulsions, deafness, or brain damage. One person in every 3,000 with measles can die from complications. Complications and death are most common in infants less than 12 months of age and in adults. Complications of measles can include:

- Ear infections - 7 to 9 in every 100 cases of measles
- Diarrhea - 6 in 100 cases
- Pneumonia - 1 to 6 in 100 cases
- Hospital stay - 1 in 100 cases
- Encephalitis - 1 in every 1,000 cases.

Because of vaccination, measles is now a rare disease in Canada. Most cases occur in unimmunized people, including visitors to Canada, who have traveled overseas.

## Measles Vaccine

The measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine provides protection against measles and is part of the routine childhood vaccine program. For more information, see [HealthLink BC File #14a Measles, Mumps, Rubella \(MMR\) Vaccine](#).

## How is measles spread?

Measles is very contagious and spreads easily. When an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes, the virus spreads through the air. The measles virus can survive in small droplets in the air for several hours. The airborne spread of measles virus makes the disease very contagious.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of measles include fever, cough, runny nose, and red and inflamed eyes (often sensitive to light). These are followed by a rash, which starts first on the face and neck, and spreads to the chest, arms and legs, and lasts at least 3 days. A doctor may notice Koplik spots inside your mouth. These spots look like small grains of sand on a red base.

Symptoms can start as soon as 8 days after the person is infected with the measles virus. A person with measles can spread the virus to others from five days *before* to four days *after* their rash first appears.

## Have you been exposed to measles?

If you have been exposed to the measles virus and have not been immunized, you can get vaccinated with MMR vaccine to prevent the illness. You need to get the vaccine within 72 hours after exposure in

order to be protected against the measles virus.

If the vaccine cannot be given in time or you have reasons not to receive this vaccine, you can get Immune Globulin (IG) for protection. IG is a sterile solution of naturally produced antibodies taken from donated human blood. Antibodies are proteins that a person's immune system makes to fight germs. IG can provide immediate and short-term protection against measles or help make it less severe. IG is recommended for the following people who have been exposed to measles and who should not receive MMR vaccine.

- Infants less than six months of age
- Pregnant women who have not had measles or measles vaccine
- Some people with weakened immune systems.

### **If You Think You Have Measles**

If you have fever and a rash and think you may have measles, have yourself examined by a doctor. It is best to call ahead so that you can be seen quickly and without infecting other people. This infection can spread to susceptible people quickly in places like waiting rooms and emergency rooms. The doctor or triage nurse can make sure that you are taken into a closed area for an examination and attend the clinic at a time when the waiting room is empty. Bring your immunization record with you. A physical examination, blood test, and throat swab or urine sample will be collected to make the diagnosis of measles.

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