

Measles

Measles is a very contagious (easily spread) illness caused by a virus.

Causes

Measles is spread by contact with droplets from the nose, mouth, or throat of an infected person. Sneezing and coughing can put contaminated droplets into the air.

Persons who had measles or who have been vaccinated against measles are immune to the disease. Before widespread vaccination, measles was so common during childhood that most people became sick with the disease by age 20. The number of measles cases dropped over the last several decades to almost none in the U.S. and Canada. But rates have started to rise again recently.

Some parents do not let their children get vaccinated because of unfounded fears that the MMR vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps, and rubella, can cause autism. Large studies of thousands of children have found no connection between this vaccine and autism. Not vaccinating children can lead to outbreaks of a measles, mumps, and rubella. These are all serious diseases.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually begin 8 to 12 days after you are exposed to the virus. This is called the incubation period.

Rash is often the main symptom. The rash:

- Usually appears 3 to 5 days after the first signs of being sick
- May last 4 to 7 days
- Usually starts on the head and spreads to other areas, moving down the body
- May appear as flat, discolored areas and solid, red, raised areas that later join together
- Itches

Other symptoms may include:

- Bloodshot eyes
- Cough
- Fever
- Light sensitivity
- Muscle pain
- Redness and irritation of the eyes
- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- Tiny white spots inside the mouth

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for the measles.

The following may relieve symptoms:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Bed rest
- Humidified air

Prognosis

Those who do not have complications such as pneumonia do very well.

Possible Complications

Complications of measles infection may include:

- Bronchitis
- Encephalitis
- Ear infection
- Pneumonia

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your health care provider if you or your child has symptoms of measles.

Prevention

Getting vaccinated is a very effective way to prevent measles. People who are not immunized, or who have not received the full immunization are at high risk of catching the disease.

Taking serum immune globulin within 6 days after being exposed to the virus can reduce the risk of developing measles or make the disease less severe.

References

1. Gershon AA. Measles virus (rubeola). In: Bennett JE, Dolin R, Mandell GL, eds. *Principles and Practice of Infectious Diseases*. 8th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Elsevier; 2014:chap 162.
2. Mason WH. Measles. In: Kliegman RM, Stanton BF, St. Geme JW III, et al., eds. *Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics*. 19th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Elsevier; 2011:chap 238.