

What is measles?

Measles is a rash illness caused by a virus that spreads very easily from person to person. Measles is rare in the United States because most people are vaccinated or have had the disease, but measles does still occur in the United States as a result of travel to or from other parts of the world, where measles is more common. In some cases, measles may cause serious illness such as pneumonia (lung inflammation) and encephalitis (brain swelling) and can even be fatal in young children.

What are the symptoms of measles?

People with measles often appear very ill. Early symptoms of measles include:

- Runny nose
- Cough
- Tiredness/Sleepiness
- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- Spots inside the mouth that look like grains of salt (Koplik Spots)
- Sensitivity to light
- Conjunctivitis (pink eye)

Around the fourth day of illness, the fever often goes up (often to over 101°F), and a blotchy red rash appears on the face or near the hair line and spreads downward and outward to the rest of the body. The rash lasts about 4 or 5 days. It slowly fades in the same order it appeared.

How is measles spread?

Measles is spread by contact with the nose or throat droplets of an infected person. This can happen when someone coughs or sneezes near someone else or when someone touches objects with nose or throat droplets on them. Measles is very contagious, and the virus can remain in the air for up to two hours. People with measles can spread the disease approximately 4 days before they even get a rash, and up to 4 days after the rash starts. Anyone with measles should stay home during that time to prevent giving the illness to others.

Who is at risk for measles?

Anyone who has not had two doses of measles vaccine is at risk for measles. All people should have two doses of measles vaccine (usually MMR, the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine) by age six. Children under the age of five and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to have complications or die from measles. Pregnant women who get measles are at a higher risk for complications such as miscarriage and early delivery.

How do I know if I have measles?

See your doctor right away. If you have been exposed to someone with measles or you have symptoms that match those described above, your doctor may test you for measles. Many other diseases cause rash illnesses. If you have received your shots for measles, it is not likely that you have the disease.

How is measles treated?

Since measles is caused by a virus, antibiotics do not cure measles. There are no medications used to treat measles. Treatment focuses on easing the symptoms of the illness.

How can measles be prevented?

The MMR vaccine is safe and very good at preventing measles. Most schools and some child-care centers require proof of vaccination before entry. If you have not had measles and have no record of getting the vaccine, see your doctor. Your doctor can decide if you need a dose of vaccine. Two doses of vaccine should provide lifelong protection from measles.

For Travelers: Measles is a problem in many other parts of the world. Though measles vaccination is a part of the routine vaccination schedule, it is a good idea to check the CDC travel guidelines for the country or countries you will be visiting and ensure you are up-to-date on your routine and travel vaccinations before travelling.

