

Measles Frequently Asked Questions

What is measles?

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease that causes fever and a rash.

Who gets measles?

Anyone who is not vaccinated can get measles at any age.

How is measles spread?

The measles virus lives in an infected person's nose and throat mucus. When that person sneezes or coughs, the measles virus sprays into the air and people can breathe in the virus. The virus remains active and contagious in the air for up to two hours. The disease is highly contagious — if one person has it 90 percent of people around them will also get it if they are not immune.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Early symptoms of measles include fever (which can reach 103 to 105 degrees F), cough, runny nose and red, watery eyes. Three to five days after symptoms start, a rash of red spots appears on the face and then spreads over the entire body.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 10 to 12 days after breathing in the virus; symptoms may start as early as seven days or as late as 21 days after exposure.

When can a person with measles spread it to others?

A person can spread measles from four days before through four days after the appearance of the rash.

Can a person get measles more than once?

No. Infection makes a person immune for the rest of their life; that means they cannot get it again.

Is there a vaccine to prevent measles?

Yes. The measles vaccine is given on or after a child's first birthday. It is combined with mumps and rubella vaccines into one vaccine called MMR (measles, mumps and rubella). A second dose of MMR vaccine is recommended before children enter school at 4 to 6 years of age. Anyone who has received two doses of a measles vaccine is considered immune and is unlikely to get measles.

What is the treatment for measles?

There is no specific medicine to treat the measles virus, but there are medicines that can treat some of the symptoms, such as medication to reduce high fever.

Can measles cause other health problems?

About a third of reported measles cases have at least one complication. Health problems caused by measles can include diarrhea, ear infections, pneumonia, seizures and infections of the brain and nervous system. In some cases, measles can cause death. In pregnant women, measles can cause miscarriages and premature labor. Measles can be serious in all age groups. However, infants, young children, pregnant women and people whose immune systems are weak are more likely to suffer from measles complications.

How can measles be prevented?

The best way to prevent measles is with vaccination. Anyone born after January 1, 1957, who has not received two doses of a measles-containing vaccine or does not have a blood test proving that they are already immune to measles, should receive two doses of MMR vaccine (the measles, mumps and rubella combination vaccine). All children enrolled in pre-kindergarten and day care programs are required to receive one dose of the measles vaccine. Children enrolled in school and college or university students must have two doses of the measles vaccine. Health care workers are required to receive two doses of a measles-containing vaccine or have a blood test showing that they are immune.

Does the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine work?

The MMR vaccine is very safe and effective. Two doses of the MMR vaccine are about 97 percent effective at preventing measles; one dose is about 93 percent effective.

Is the measles vaccine safe?

Most people who receive the MMR vaccine do not have any side effects. Some people experience mild side effects like fever, mild rash or swelling of glands in the cheeks or neck. Severe problems are very rare. For more information about the MMR vaccine, visit Immunization Action Coalition: Vaccine Information Statements at www.immunize.org/vis/vis_mmr.asp.

Where can I get more information about measles or the MMR vaccine?

Visit these online resources:

Measles (Immunization Action Coalition): www.vaccineinformation.org/measles

Measles Overview (Centers for Disease Control): www.cdc.gov/measles