

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Measles

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is measles?

Measles is a disease caused by a virus that spreads very easily from person to person. It usually lasts a week or two. Measles looks and feels like a cold at first. A cough, high fever, runny nose and red, watery eyes are common. A few days later, a red, blotchy rash starts on the face, then spreads to the rest of the body.

Is measles dangerous?

Yes. Measles often causes diarrhea, ear infections and pneumonia. Deafness, blindness, seizure disorders and other brain diseases with measles are less common. Measles can also cause swelling of the brain and death, although this is rare in the United States. Measles is most dangerous for children under 5 years of age, adults over 20 years of age, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems.

How is measles spread?

Measles is more easily spread than almost any other disease. The virus that causes measles is produced in the nose and throat and is sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. It can stay in the air for up to 2 hours. Other people nearby can then inhale the virus. Touching tissues or sharing a cup used by someone who has measles can also spread the virus. People with measles can spread the disease starting 4 days before until 4 days after the rash begins. The first symptoms appear 10 - 14 days after a person is exposed.

Who gets measles?

- Anyone who never had measles and has never been vaccinated.
- Babies younger than 12 months old, because they are too young to be vaccinated.
- Adults who were vaccinated before 1968, because some early vaccines did not give lasting protection.

How is measles diagnosed?

Because measles can look like other diseases that cause a rash, the only sure way to know if you have measles is to get a blood test. Sometimes throat and urine tests will also be done.

How can you prevent measles?

- Protect your children by having them vaccinated when they are 12 - 15 months old, and again when they are about to enter kindergarten. Measles vaccine is usually given in a shot called MMR, which protects against measles, mumps and rubella. There are now many fewer cases of these three diseases because children get the MMR vaccine.
- State regulations require certain groups to be vaccinated against measles. Some health care workers and all children in child care, preschool, grades 1 - 12 and college need to have 2 doses of measles vaccine for school entry, usually given as the combination MMR vaccine. Childcare workers also need to have 1 or 2 doses of measles containing vaccine, depending on their age and other factors. A blood test that proves immunity can also be used to fulfill this requirement for all groups.
- Women who plan to have children and are not immune should get MMR at least 4 weeks before getting pregnant.
- If you have been exposed to measles, talk to your doctor or nurse right away to see if you need a vaccination. If

you get the vaccine less than 3 days (72 hours) after being exposed, it will help protect you against measles. People who cannot be vaccinated can be treated with immune globulin (IG antibodies) up to 6 days after exposure. IG may not prevent measles, but it does make the disease milder.

- People with measles should be kept away from people who are not immune until they are well again. State regulations require anyone who catches measles to be isolated for 4 days after the rash appears. That means they must be kept away from public places like day care centers, school and work.

Is MMR vaccine safe?

Yes. It is safe for most people. However, a vaccine, like other medicines, can cause side effects in some people. The MMR vaccine can cause fever, mild rash, temporary pain or stiffness of the joints. More severe problems, such as seizures, bleeding problems or allergic reactions are very rare. Getting MMR vaccine is much safer than getting measles, and most people do not have any problems with the vaccine.

Who should not get MMR vaccine?

- People who have serious allergies to gelatin, the drug neomycin or a previous dose of the vaccine.
- Pregnant women or women who are trying to get pregnant within 4 weeks should not get MMR vaccine until after they deliver their babies.
- People with cancer, HIV or other problems, or treatments that weaken the immune system should check with their doctor or nurse before getting vaccinated.
- People who have recently had a transfusion or were given other blood products should check with their doctor or nurse before getting vaccinated.
- People with high fevers should not be vaccinated until after the fever and other symptoms are gone.

Should health care workers be extra careful about measles?

Yes. Health care workers who are not immune to measles can pick up the virus and spread it to their patients, who might then become dangerously ill. That is why it is recommended that some health care workers who have never had measles and cannot prove that they were vaccinated must stay out of work from the 5th day through the 21st day after being exposed to measles or at least 4 days after the rash appears. Health care workers born in 1957 or later who have direct patient contact should have proof of 2 doses of measles vaccine, with the first received after their first birthday and both doses received after 1967. Older health care workers (those born in the United States before 1957) should have at least 1 dose of measles vaccine to make sure they are immune.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, or your local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government).
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Immunization Program (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH Website at <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/>.

Northeast Regional Office, Tewksbury (978) 851-7261

Central Regional Office, West Boylston (508) 792-7880

Southeast Regional Office, Taunton (508) 977-3709

Metro/Boston* Regional Office, Jamaica Plain (617) 983-6860

Western Regional Office, Amherst (413) 545-6600

*Boston providers and residents may also call the Boston Public Health Commission at (617) 534-5611.

CDC National Immunization Information Hotline:

- English: 1-800-232-2522 or Spanish: 1-800-232-0233 (Mon – Fri, 8am – 11pm)
- TTY: 1-800-243-7889 (Mon – Fri, 10am – 10pm)