

MEASLES (red measles or rubeola)

What is measles?

Measles (red measles or rubeola) is a disease caused by the measles virus. It is not the same as Rubella (German measles).

There has been a large decrease in the number of measles infection in countries where vaccine has been widely used, however measles remains a common disease in many parts of the world.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms that usually start about eight to 12 days after infection include high fever, runny nose, cough, sore eyes, and tiny white spots on the inside of the mouth. A red blotchy rash appears on the face and then on the rest of the body.

Measles can cause ear infections or pneumonia (a serious infection of the lung). Sometimes measles infection can lead to swelling of the brain (encephalitis) which can cause seizures, deafness, brain damage or death .

Most people are sick for up to ten days and then recover completely. It is important to see your health-care provider if you have symptoms of measles.

How is measles spread?

Measles is spread through close contact with an infected person from four days before to four days after the rash develops. You can become infected by breathing in the virus when in close contact with someone who coughs or sneezes. The virus can also be spread by direct contact with infected nasal or throat secretions through:

- kissing, sharing food, drinks or eating utensils
- sharing toothbrushes, mouth guards, towels, cigarettes or lipstick
- sharing mouthed toys (young children) or musical instruments with a mouthpiece

How is measles diagnosed?

Measles is diagnosed by a history of contact with someone who has the disease, symptoms, and laboratory testing.

Whenever measles is suspected, a blood test and samples from the nose, throat and urine should be collected to confirm the diagnosis.

Who is at risk of infection?

Once someone has had measles they are considered protected for life. Most individuals born before 1970 likely had measles as a child and are considered to be protected. Anyone born after 1970 who has not had two doses of measles vaccine and has never had measles is at risk.

How can measles be prevented?

The best way to protect against measles is to be immunized. In New Brunswick, children are routinely immunized with two doses of the MMR vaccine at 12 and 18 months old. Individuals born in 1970 or later who have not previously received two doses of MMR vaccine should contact their health care provider to be immunized.

Consult your health care provider or a travel clinic before you or your loved ones travel to ensure you are up to date with your immunization.

Persons with measles should not attend childcare centres, school, or work for four days after the rash appears. Covering nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, disposing soiled tissues, washing hands well and not sharing eating utensils, food or drinking cups will also help to reduce the spread of infection.

How is measles treated?

There is no specific treatment for measles. Symptoms such as fever and headache may be treated with acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®). ASA or Aspirin® should NOT be given to anyone under 18 years of age due to the risk of Reye's syndrome with some viral infections.

If measles is suspected, it is important to call ahead before going to your health centre so precautions can be taken to ensure that the infection is not passed to others.

What is the public health response?

Health-care providers, hospitals and laboratories, schools and childcare centres must immediately notify cases of measles to Public Health. Public health staff will interview the health-care provider and patient (or care-givers) to find out how the infection occurred, identify other people at risk of infection, start actions to help stop the spread of the infection (such as immunization and restrictions on attending school or work) and provide other advice.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, local Public Health office or Tele-Care 811.

Useful websites:

Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness and Promotion <http://www.immunize.cpha.ca>

Public Health Agency of Canada <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca>

Canadian Pediatric Society <http://www.cps.ca>