

# Measles

## What is measles?

Measles, also known as red measles, is a severe illness caused by the measles virus.

Measles can cause encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain, which can lead to seizures, deafness, or brain damage. One person in every 3,000 with measles may die from complications. Complications and death are most common in infants less than 12 months of age and in adults.

Complications of measles can include:

- Ear infections (1 in 10 cases)
- Diarrhea (8 in 100 cases)
- Pneumonia (1 in 10 cases)
- Hospital stay (1 to 2 in 10 cases)
- Encephalitis (1 in every 1,000 cases)

Because of immunization, measles is now a rare disease in Canada. Most cases occur in unimmunized people, including visitors to Canada, who have traveled overseas.

## Is there a measles vaccine?

There are 2 vaccines available in B.C. that provide protection against measles:

1. Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR) Vaccine
2. Measles, Mumps, Rubella and Varicella (MMRV) Vaccine

The vaccines are provided free as part of routine childhood immunizations and to others that need protection against measles. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #14a Measles, Mumps, Rubella \(MMR\)](#)

[Vaccine](#) and [HealthLinkBC File #14e Measles, Mumps, Rubella and Varicella \(MMRV\) Vaccine](#).

## How is measles spread?

Measles is very contagious and spreads easily. When an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes, the virus spreads through the air. The measles virus can survive in small droplets in the air for several hours. You can become infected when you breathe in these droplets or touch objects contaminated with the virus. The airborne spread of measles virus makes the disease very contagious. Sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, or kissing someone who has the virus can also put you at risk.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of measles include fever, cough, runny nose, and red and inflamed eyes that are often sensitive to light. These symptoms are followed by a rash, which starts first on the face and neck, and spreads to the chest, arms and legs, and lasts about 4 to 7 days. There may also be small white spots inside the mouth.

Symptoms can start as soon as 7 days after a person is infected with the measles virus.

## What if I have been exposed to measles?

If you have been exposed to the measles virus and have not had the disease or received 2 doses of a measles vaccine, you should get immunized to prevent the illness. You need to get the vaccine within 72 hours after exposure in order to be protected against the measles virus. People born before

1970 do not need to get the vaccine as they have probably had measles.

If the vaccine cannot be given in time or it is not recommended that you receive the vaccine, you may be given immune globulin for protection. Immune globulin contains antibodies taken from donated human blood. Antibodies are proteins that a person's immune system makes to fight germs, such as viruses or bacteria. Immune globulin provided within 6 days of being exposed to measles can protect against measles infections or make the illness less severe. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #63 Immune Globulin](#).

### What should I do if I think I have measles?

If you have fever and a rash and think you may have measles, especially if you have been in contact with someone with measles or traveled to an area with a measles outbreak, have yourself examined by a health care provider. It is best to call ahead so that you can be seen quickly and without infecting other people. Measles can spread easily in places like waiting rooms and emergency rooms. The doctor or triage nurse can make sure that you are taken into a closed area for an examination and attend the clinic at a time when the waiting room is empty. Bring your immunization record with you. A physical examination, blood test, and throat swab or urine sample will be collected to make the diagnosis of measles.

### How can I prevent spreading measles to others?

A person with measles can spread the virus to others from 4 days before to 4 days after their rash first appears. If you have measles you can help prevent spreading it to others by:

- Staying at home for at least 4 days after the rash first appeared.

- Washing your hands regularly.
- Coughing or sneezing into a tissue or sleeve rather than your hands.
- Not sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, or kissing others.

### What is the home treatment?

After seeing a health care provider, the following home treatment tips may help you to be more comfortable while you rest and recover.

- Drink plenty of fluids such as water, juice and soup, especially if you have a fever.
- Get plenty of rest.

Acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) or ibuprofen\* (e.g. Advil®) can be given for fever or soreness. ASA (e.g. Aspirin®) should not be given to anyone under 18 years of age due to the risk of Reye Syndrome.

\*Ibuprofen should not be given to children under 6 months of age without first speaking to your health care provider.

For more information on Reye Syndrome, see [HealthLinkBC File #84 Reye Syndrome](#).

For more information on immunizations visit ImmunizeBC at [www.immunizebc.ca](http://www.immunizebc.ca).

