

Measles fact sheet

What is Measles?

Measles, sometimes known as English measles, is a viral infection that can lead to ear infections, pneumonia and/or diarrhoea. Sometimes it can cause serious problems such as inflammation (swelling) of the brain.

What are the symptoms?

The disease begins with a fever, conjunctivitis (red eyes), runny nose and small irregular, bright red spots with a small white speck, on the inside of the mouth. The characteristic red rash appears on the body on the third to seventh day and lasts for up to one week.

Diagnosis is confirmed by a blood test, throat swab or urine test.

How is it caught / spread?

Measles is one of the most highly infectious diseases and is spread by airborne droplets from sneezing, coughing or from direct contact with nasal or throat secretions.

- It takes 10-12 days after exposure for the onset of fever
- Another 2-4 days after the fever for the rash to appear
- The onset of fever and rash however may vary from 7-20 days.

A person is infectious from one day before the start of symptoms to four days after the appearance of the rash.

Although a child occasionally develops a rash after the MMR vaccination, the vaccine virus does not spread from person-to-person.

How is it treated?

Usually the only treatment is to relieve symptoms. In particularly serious cases or those with Vitamin A deficiency, eg. malabsorption, vitamin A supplementation may be given.

It is important that a person with measles is kept at home until he/she is not infectious to prevent spreading it to others.

Can it be prevented?

Immunisation is the only effective means of preventing the disease and controlling it in the community. The measles vaccine is included in the MMR vaccination which is given at age 15 months and 4 years as part of the free childhood immunisation programme. Immunised children occasionally still develop measles but it is usually not as severe as in the unimmunised cases. Immunisation is 99% effective after the second dose. Most adults are considered to be immune because of previous infection.

If a non-immune person gets vaccinated within 3 days of exposure he/she may not develop measles.

If measles is suspected, the child should be seen by a doctor and kept away from other children. He/she should be off school/preschool for at least four days after the appearance of the rash. Unimmunised contacts who do not have a history of measles confirmed by a blood test may be excluded from school/preschool for 14 days after exposure.