

# Health Office Fact Sheet



## Measles

This factsheet is for people who have measles or would like information about measles. Measles is a different condition to German measles (Rubella), which is caused by a different virus - the rubella virus. Measles is a mild to moderately severe illness caused by a virus. It is a highly contagious respiratory illness. This means the measles virus can easily be passed from one person to another if a person breathes it in. If one person has it, nine out of ten people who come into close contact with that person will get measles.

Measles is now less common because of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination (see Prevention of measles).

### Symptoms of measles

The early signs of a measles infection occur between 6 and 19 days after becoming infected. These symptoms last for about two to four days and may include:

- a fever
- an eye infection with discharge (conjunctivitis)
- a runny nose
- a cough

### Measles rash

A red rash will usually appear a few days after the initial symptoms of measles. The rash generally spreads from the face and neck to the rest of the body and lasts for about a week before fading. You are most likely to catch measles from someone who is in the early stages of infection until four days after the rash has appeared.

### Complications of measles

Complications of measles such as ear infections (otitis media), pneumonia and diarrhoea are common. More serious complications include inflammation of:

- part of the lung
- the sinuses
- the heart wall
- part of the bowel
- the liver

You may also have ulcers in the eye and bleeding. Severe complications, such as encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) and subacute sclerosing panencephalitis (SSPE), which also affects the brain, are rare but can be fatal in the late stages of infection. Symptoms of encephalitis are similar to meningitis and include being drowsy, headache, fits, confusion and a dislike of light. Symptoms of SSPE include fits, mental problems and strange behaviour.

Complications occur more often in children under five and adults over 20. People who have a weak immune system are also more at risk, such as those with AIDS or illnesses such as leukaemia.

The fatality rate from the complications of measles for otherwise healthy people in developed countries is relatively low. In developing countries around 1 in 20 people die from measles but this can be up to five in 20 people, particularly if they are not getting enough nutrients to support their immune system. One million children die from measles worldwide each year.

If you are pregnant and become infected with measles, the virus can cause miscarriage, premature birth of your baby or low-birth weight when he or she is born.

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### Causes of measles

The measles paramyxovirus is spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The droplets of infected mucus or saliva suspended in the air are breathed in by other people. The measles virus then grows in cells in the back of the throat and in the lungs.

You can also get measles if you are in close or direct contact with the nose or mouth of someone with the virus. The virus can survive on surfaces for up to two hours and be passed on when you touch the surface with the virus on it and then touch your mouth or nose.

### Diagnosis of measles

Your GP will examine you and ask you about your symptoms.

Measles is a notifiable disease. This means that if your GP suspects that you have measles, by law they have to report it to their local authority. This is so there can be accurate statistics of how many people in the UK are getting measles each year.

### Treatment of measles

There is no specific antiviral treatment for measles. Taking the painkiller you would normally take for a headache will help to ease symptoms. It's also important to drink plenty of fluids to stop you from becoming dehydrated. Your GP may prescribe antibiotics for complications, such as pneumonia.

### Prevention of measles

Measles is a preventable condition.

### The measles vaccine

The most effective way to protect against measles is immunisation with the MMR vaccine (the measles vaccine) - a combined vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella. This is given in two doses to children at around 13 months. Older children and adults can also have the vaccine.

The Health Protection Agency advises that children with measles should stay away from school or nursery for at least five days after the rash appears to stop them passing the infection to other children.

Once you have had measles you won't get it again.

This information is taken from:

- [http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact\\_sheets/html/measles.html](http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/html/measles.html)

For more information the following web sites may be of use:

- <http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk/Vaccines/MMR/Resources>
- [http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact\\_sheets/html/measles.html](http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/html/measles.html)