



Mayor Thomas M. Menino

## PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Infectious Disease Bureau

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# Measles

### **What is measles?**

Measles (also called rubeola) is an illness caused by a virus. The illness spreads easily from person to person.

### **Who gets measles?**

Anyone who is not immune to measles can get the infection. Babies less than 12 months of age are too young to be vaccinated against measles and can get very sick if infected. Measles is not very common in the United States. In recent years, many of the US cases have been in people who were exposed outside the United States.

### **How is measles spread?**

The measles virus spreads easily when an infected person coughs or sneezes, releasing virus particles in the air. Another person can then breathe in the virus.

### **What are the symptoms of measles?**

The symptoms of measles generally begin about 7-14 days after a person is exposed and usually include fever, runny nose, cough, red watery eyes, and a rash. The skin rash usually appears about 2 to 4 days after the early symptoms develop. The rash begins on the face and soon spreads to other parts of the body. The rash usually lasts 5 to 6 days and then disappears in the same order it appeared (head to foot).

### **When and for how long is a person able to spread measles?**

A person is able to spread measles from 4 days before to 4 days after the rash appears.

### **How soon do the symptoms appear if someone is exposed?**

The rash usually starts about 7-14 days after exposure, but can appear 5 to 18 days after exposure.

### **What are the complications associated with measles?**

Serious problems resulting from measles infection include pneumonia, seizures, diarrhea, ear infections and brain infections. Pregnant women need to take special care to avoid measles because it can cause miscarriage, premature labor or low birth weight in the fetus.

### **Does past infection to measles make a person immune?**

Yes. Persons who have had measles in the past have lifelong immunity. Since measles can be confused with other infections that cause fever and a rash, a person needs a special blood test to be sure they are immune.

### **What is the treatment for measles?**

There is no specific treatment for measles. Most people will recover on their own. Symptoms such as a fever can be reduced with over the counter medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen. It is important to contact your health care provider if you show signs of measles and to inform your

health care provider if you have been exposed so that they can take the correct precautions when evaluating you.

**Can measles be prevented?**

Yes. Two doses of measles vaccine (usually given in combination with mumps and rubella vaccine and called MMR vaccine) are recommended. In the US, the first dose is usually given to children at 12 to 15 months of age and the second dose after 4 years of age. The two doses of vaccine normally provide life-long protection. Adults born in the United States after January 1, 1957 who do not have a blood test that shows immunity to measles should also be vaccinated. Persons born outside the United States, regardless of year of birth, are not considered to be immune unless they have written proof of measles vaccination or have a blood test showing they are immune to measles. Healthcare workers of any age must have proof of two doses of measles containing vaccine or a blood test that shows they are immune.

**What should I do if I have been exposed to measles?**

If you have been exposed to measles, call your healthcare provider to see if you need to be vaccinated. If you find out that you should be vaccinated, vaccine given within 72 hours after exposure after exposure may prevent illness or make it less severe. Some people with underlying illnesses cannot be vaccinated against measles and may need to get an immune globulin shot to help make the illness less severe.

**For more information, please contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control  
(617) 534-5611 or [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)**