



Mayor Thomas M. Menino

Public Health Fact Sheet

Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
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Measles

What is measles?

Measles is a disease caused by a virus. The disease spreads easily from person to person and causes a fever, rash and runny nose.

Who gets measles?

Measles usually affects school-age children but any person who has not had measles infection can get the disease. Persons who are not fully vaccinated against measles are at the highest risk for infection. Babies less than 12 months of age are too young to be vaccinated and can develop disease.

How is measles spread?

The measles virus spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes and another person breathes in the virus. The virus can also spread by direct contact with the nose or throat discharge of an infected person.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Early symptoms include a high fever, runny nose, cough and red, watery eyes. A skin rash usually occurs about 2-4 days after the initial symptoms develop. The rash begins on the face and soon spreads to other parts of the body. The rash usually lasts 4-7 days and then disappears in the same order it appeared (head to foot). Koplik spots (little white spots) may become visible inside the cheeks of the mouth 1-2 days before or after skin rash onset.

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?

Fever symptoms usually begin 8-12 days after exposure to an infected person. The rash usually appears 14 days after exposure.

What are the complications associated with measles?

Measles is usually most severe in infants and adults. Problems resulting from measles infection may include pneumonia, seizures, diarrhea, ear infections, brain infections and even death. The disease can cause miscarriages in pregnant women.

Does past infection to measles make a person immune?

Yes. Persons who have had measles in the past have lifelong immunity.

What is the treatment for measles?

There is no specific treatment for measles. In some areas where malnutrition is common, vitamin A supplements may be given.

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Can measles be prevented?

Yes. Measles vaccine (usually given in combination with mumps and rubella vaccine and called MMR vaccine) is recommended for all children in a series of two doses. The first dose is given to children after 12 months of age and the second dose after 4 years of age. The two doses of vaccine normally provide life long immunity. Adults born after 1957 who do not have evidence of immunity to measles should also consider vaccination.

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

If you have been exposed to measles, talk to your health care provider right away to see if you need to be vaccinated. If it is determined that you should be vaccinated, vaccine should be given within 72 hours after exposure in order to prevent or decrease the severity of disease. Susceptible people who cannot be vaccinated, can be treated with immune globulin up to 6 days after exposure to prevent or modify disease.

*For more information, please contact:
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