



Public Health
Agency

WFLS

Symptoms and treatment

Measles is a highly infectious viral illness that can be very unpleasant and sometimes lead to serious complications. The measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination is very effective at protecting people from getting measles (as well as mumps and rubella).

Anyone can get measles if they haven't been vaccinated or they haven't had it before, although it's most common in young children.

The infection usually clears in around 7 to 10 days.



Symptoms of measles

The initial symptoms of measles develop around 10 days, but may be as short as 7 days or as long as 21 days, after you're infected. These can include:

- cold-like symptoms, such as a runny nose, sneezing, and a cough;
- sore, red eyes that may be sensitive to light;
- a high temperature (fever), which may reach around 40°C (104°F);
- small greyish-white spots on the inside of the cheeks.

A few days later, a red-brown blotchy rash will appear. This usually starts on the head or upper neck, before spreading outwards to the rest of the body.

When to see your GP

You should contact your GP as soon as possible if you suspect that you or your child may have measles.

You should phone before your visit as your GP surgery may need to make arrangements to reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others.

If you need to contact an emergency or out of hours service, it is important to phone ahead if you are experiencing any of the signs and symptoms of measles.



Is measles serious?

Measles is caused by a very infectious virus giving a rash and high fever. It can also be serious.

Measles can be unpleasant, but will usually pass in about 7 to 10 days without causing any further problems. A child with measles will have to spend about five days in bed and may be off school for ten days. Adults are likely to be ill for longer.

However, it can also be very serious with potentially life-threatening complications in some people. About one in every 15 children with measles will develop more serious complications. These can include ear and chest infections, fits, diarrhoea, encephalitis (infection of the brain), and brain damage. Measles can kill.

Once you've had measles, your body builds up resistance (immunity) to the virus and it's highly unlikely you'll get it again.



How measles is spread

The measles virus is contained in the millions of tiny droplets that come out of the nose and mouth when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

You can easily catch measles by breathing in these droplets or, if the droplets have settled on a surface, by touching the surface and then placing your hands near your nose or mouth. The virus can survive on surfaces for a few hours.

People with measles are infectious from when the symptoms develop until about four days after the rash first appears.

How measles can be prevented

Measles can be prevented by having the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine.

This is given in two doses as part of the childhood vaccination programme. The first dose is given just after your child's first birthday and a second dose is given at 3 years and 4 months, before your child starts school.

Adults and older children can be vaccinated at any age if they haven't been fully vaccinated before. Ask your GP about having the vaccination.

Treating measles

There's no specific treatment for measles, but the condition usually improves within 7 to 10 days. Your GP will probably suggest taking things easy at home until you're feeling better.

Stay away from work or school for at least four days from when the measles rash first appears to reduce the risk of spreading the infection.

You should also try to avoid contact with people who are more vulnerable to the infection, such as young children, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems.

Relieving symptoms

If the symptoms of measles are causing discomfort for you or your child, there are some things you can do to treat these while you wait for your body to fight off the virus.

Controlling fever and relieving pain

Paracetamol or ibuprofen can be used to reduce a high temperature (fever) and relieve any aches or pains if your child is uncomfortable.

Liquid infant paracetamol can be used for young children. Aspirin should not be given to children under 16 years old.

Speak to your pharmacist if you're not sure which medications are suitable for your child.

Drink plenty of fluids

If your child has a high temperature, make sure they drink plenty of fluids as they may be at risk of dehydration.

Keeping hydrated may also help reduce throat discomfort caused by coughing.





Treating sore eyes

You can gently clean away any crustiness from your child's eyelids and lashes using cotton wool soaked in water.

Closing curtains or dimming lights can help if bright light is hurting their eyes.

Treating cold-like symptoms

If your child has cold-like symptoms, such as a runny nose or a cough, there are a number of things you can do to help them feel more comfortable. For example, you could put a wet towel on a warm radiator to moisten the air, which may help ease your child's cough.

Drinking warm drinks, particularly ones containing lemon or honey, may also help to relax the airways, loosen mucus, and soothe a cough. Honey should not be given to babies under 12 months.



Spotting signs of serious illness

If you or your child has measles, you should keep an eye out for any signs of the serious complications that can sometimes develop. Signs of a more serious problem include:

- shortness of breath;
- a sharp chest pain that feels worse with breathing;
- coughing up blood;
- drowsiness;
- confusion;
- fits (convulsions).

Go to your emergency department or call 999 for an ambulance if you or your child develops any of these symptoms.





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For more information contact your local GP surgery or visit: www.nhs.uk/mmr