

Measles

What is it?

Measles is a serious and highly infectious viral disease that can make people very sick and can lead to hospitalisation or, in rare cases, death.

It is spread from person to person through the air by breathing, sneezing or coughing. Just being in the same room as someone with measles can lead to infection if you are not immunised. One person with measles can pass on the disease to 13 other people who have not been immunised. If you are not immunised you could have measles and spread it without even knowing it.

The only way to prevent getting measles is to get immunised.

What might happen if I get measles?

Symptoms usually take about 10 days to develop but it might take as long as 18 days.

The early symptoms include fever, cough, runny nose, sore red eyes and white spots inside the mouth. After 3 to 5 days a rash appears on the head and then moves down the body.

Up to one in 3 people with measles develops complications, including ear infections, pneumonia or diarrhoea.

Acute encephalitis (brain inflammation) develops in 1 in 1000 cases, some of whom die and more than one third are left with permanent brain damage.

One in three people with measles will require hospital treatment.

Who is at risk of getting measles?

If you were born after January 1969, and haven't had two doses of measles vaccine, or had measles, you are at risk of catching the disease.

Babies are not the only ones at risk, older children, teenagers and adults who are not immunised are also at risk from getting sick from measles.

Anyone with a weakened immune system (for example, people who are receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy for cancer or people who take high-dose steroid medications) is at higher risk of complications if they get measles.

Pregnant women who are not immunised and who get measles are at risk of miscarriage, still birth and low birth weights for their babies. Non immune pregnant women should not be immunised but it is very important their family and close contacts are immunised to protect the pregnant mother and unborn baby.

How effective is the MMR vaccine against measles?

After the first dose of the MMR vaccine, about 95% of people will be protected against measles.

After the second dose more than 99% of people are protected.

The only thing that can stop you or your child catching measles is getting immunised. The measles vaccination (MMR) is free from your healthcare provider.

If you suspect you or your child is sick with measles phone your GP or Healthline on 0800 611 116.

If you or your child is unwell, call your family doctor or Healthline on 0800 611 116 for free advice from a registered nurse 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

For further information call Regional Public Health on (04) 570 9002 or visit www.rph.org.nz