

Measles

Fact sheet

What is measles?

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease that can cause serious complications. It remains a common cause of death in children under 5 in some parts of the world.

In the past, measles infection was very common in childhood in Australia. Most people born before 1966 will have been infected with measles as a child and are likely to be immune.

Thanks to immunisation measles is now rare in Australia.

However, measles remains common in many parts of the world, and large outbreaks continue to occur in a number of countries. People travelling overseas or coming to Australia can bring the disease back with them, causing measles outbreaks in the community. This is why it is important to make sure you are vaccinated against measles to help protect yourself and the community.

It is important to make sure anyone born after 1966 has received two doses of measles vaccine.

What are the symptoms of measles?

The first symptoms are fever, tiredness, cough, runny nose, sore red eyes and feeling unwell. A few days later a rash appears. The rash starts on the face, spreads down to the body and lasts for 4-7 days. The rash is not itchy. Young children (especially infants) may also experience diarrhoea.

The symptoms of measles usually start 10 days after being exposed to the virus but can sometimes take as few as seven or as many as 18 days to appear. The rash usually appears around 14 days after exposure to the measles virus.

Measles is a severe disease. Up to a third of people with measles have complications and may require hospitalisation. Complications of measles can include ear infections, diarrhoea, and pneumonia. About one in every 1000 people with measles develops encephalitis (swelling of the brain).

How is measles spread?

Measles is commonly spread when a person breathes in the measles virus that has been coughed or sneezed into the air by an infectious person.

Measles is one of the most easily spread of all human infections. Just being in the same room as

someone with measles can result in infection.

People with measles are usually infectious from just before the symptoms begin until four days after the rash appears.

Who is at risk of getting measles?

People are at risk of measles if:

- they have never had measles infection **or**
- they have not had two doses of measles containing vaccine **or**
- they have a weakened immune system (e.g., people who are receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy for cancer or people who take high-dose steroid medications) even if they have been fully immunised or have had past measles infection **and**
- they have had contact with someone with measles infection.

Measles remains common in many countries and large outbreaks often occur. People travelling overseas are at risk of measles if they are not immune.

How can measles be prevented?

Vaccination

The best protection against measles is to get vaccinated. Two doses of measles vaccine (at least four weeks apart) provide long term, possibly lifelong, protection in 99% of vaccinated people.

People planning travel overseas should speak to their GP or pharmacist about vaccination, check that their vaccinations are up to date, and make sure they are fully vaccinated against measles before leaving Australia.

In Australia, two doses of measles vaccine are offered to children under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) for free at:

- 12 months of age as measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine
- 18 months of age as measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV) vaccine.

These vaccines provide protection against mumps, German measles (rubella), and chicken pox (varicella) as well as measles.

People planning on travelling overseas with children between 6 and 18 months of age should discuss their travel plans with their GP, as the schedule can be adjusted for children travelling to areas with a high risk of measles.

Anyone born during or after 1966 who has never had measles infection should see their doctor to make sure that they have had two doses of measles vaccine at least four weeks apart. If not, the vaccine is free in NSW.

It is safe to have the vaccine more than twice, so people who are unsure should get vaccinated.

Measles vaccines can be accessed in NSW from general practitioners and registered pharmacist immunisers.

Pharmacist immunisers are unable to provide measles vaccines under the NIP or to children under the age of 12.

For anyone without evidence of two doses of measles vaccine (not seeking a vaccine under the NIP) the vaccine itself will be free, however the pharmacist or doctor may charge a service fee to administer the vaccine.

For more information see the [Measles Vaccination FAQs](#).

Avoid others if you have symptoms

People with symptoms of measles should call ahead when attending healthcare facilities (such as an emergency department or GP), to inform staff of their symptoms and travel history where relevant, so that they can be isolated upon arrival to limit the potential spread of measles to others.

People with measles should stay at home until they are no longer infectious (i.e until four days after the rash starts) to reduce the possibility of spreading it to other people.

How is measles diagnosed?

Measles is suspected when a person feels unwell, has a cough, runny nose or sore eyes and a fever followed by a rash.

Whenever measles is suspected, samples from the nose, throat, and urine should be collected to confirm the diagnosis. A blood test may also be performed.

Confirmation of the diagnosis is important as it allows prompt public health follow-up of other people who are at risk of contracting measles.

How is measles treated?

There is no specific treatment for measles. People with a measles infection are normally advised to rest, drink plenty of fluids, and take paracetamol to treat the fever.

For some people the illness may become severe enough to require hospitalisation.

What is the public health response to measles?

Doctors, hospitals and laboratories, schools, and childcare centres must notify cases of measles to the local Public Health Unit.

Public Health Unit staff will interview the doctor and patient (or carers) to find out how the infection occurred, identify other people at risk of infection, implement control measures (such as immunisation and restrictions on attending school or work), and provide other advice.

People with measles should stay at home and not attend work, school or early childhood education and care services for at least four days after the rash appears.

The [Measles: Information for Contacts form](#) contains useful information for clinicians to provide to measles contacts, following assessment and/or provision of post exposure prophylaxis.

More information

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055.

If you, or your child, have symptoms of measles and you are concerned, speak to your doctor right away, or in an emergency call 000. For health advice you can call also health direct on 1800 022 222 for free 24-hour health advice or speak to your local pharmacist.