

# Measles

## *Information Sheet*

### **What is it?**

Measles is a serious respiratory disease caused by the Morbilli Measles virus and is sometimes known as English Measles. This form of measles is different from Rubella (sometimes known as German Measles). In the past, measles infection was common in childhood but is now rare in New Zealand because of childhood immunisation programmes.

It is a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956 and Public Health staff will contact cases to find how the infection occurred, identify other people at risk of infection, implement control measures and provide other advice.

### **How does a person become infected?**

Measles is usually spread by coughing and sneezing. The virus lives in the mucus in the nose and throat of the infected person. When that person sneezes or coughs, droplets spray into the air. The infected mucus can land in other people's noses or throats when they breathe, or put their fingers in their mouth or nose after touching an infected surface. The virus remains active and infectious on infected surfaces for up to 2 hours. Measles can spread so easily that anyone who is not immune (via immunisation or previous measles infection) will probably get it.

People are infectious from just before the symptoms begin to 4 days after the onset of the rash.

People at risk of measles include:

- people who have never had measles and are under 12 months of age
- people who have never had measles and have not received any dose of Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) vaccine between the ages of 12 months and 4 years
- people who have never had measles and have not received two doses of MMR vaccine from the age of 4 years
- people with a weak immune system (e.g. people on chemotherapy/radiotherapy for cancer) even if they have been fully immunised or have had measles infection previously
- people who are not immune and travel overseas

Most people born prior to 1969 are considered to be immune due to previous exposure.

### **What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?**

The illness may take up to 18 days (but most commonly about 10 days) for the symptoms to show after you have been infected. The usual symptoms are:

- High fever (lasting about 2 to 4 days)
- Cough
- Runny nose and/or sore, red watery eyes (lasting about a week)

- Feeling unwell
- A red blotchy rash which begins at the hairline, then involves the face and upper neck. Over the next 3 days, the rash gradually proceeds downward and outward, reaching the hands and feet. The rash usually appears about 14 days after exposure and lasts 4 to 7 days.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by blood tests and/or throat or nasopharyngeal (a type of nose swab) swabs arranged by a doctor.

### How bad is it?

Most cases of measles make a person feel very miserable and unwell but complete recovery occurs in 1-2 weeks. However up to a third of people infected with measles can have serious complications such as diarrhoea, ear infections, pneumonia and encephalitis (swelling of the brain). These complications are more common among children than in adults and usually require hospitalisation.

There is no specific treatment for measles. Treatment includes rest, plenty of fluids and paracetamol for fever.

For people who are not immune and come into contact with a case of measles, infection can sometimes be prevented with MMR vaccine (if given within 3 days of exposure) or with immunoglobulin (within 6 days of exposure). This will be arranged by your doctor with your local Public Health Unit.

Once you have had measles you cannot get it again.

### Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your Communicable Disease Nurse at your local Public Health Unit can give you advice on this. Generally cases are kept home from childcare, school and work until at least 4 days have passed since the rash appeared.

Children who have not been immunised against measles and who have come into contact with a case (and do not receive MMR or immunoglobulin after exposure) have to stay away from childcare or school until 14 days after the rash appeared in the person with measles. It is also recommended that susceptible adults also do not attend work during this period. This is because people are infectious before they develop symptoms and well before the rash develops.

### How do I avoid the illness?

The best protection against measles is through immunisation with a vaccine called MMR (Measles-Mumps-Rubella vaccine). This vaccine provides protection against measles as well as against mumps and rubella. It is a safe and effective vaccine that has been used worldwide for many years.

MMR vaccine is part of the childhood immunisation schedule; children receive one dose of vaccine at age 15 months and a second at 4 years. When measles circulates in the community, MMR immunisation may be given earlier. The first MMR dose can be given at 12 months and the second MMR dose can be given any time 4 weeks after the first dose. These two doses provide protection against measles in over 95% of those immunised. Two doses of MMR vaccine provides protection against measles in over 95% of those immunised.

It is never too late to get your MMR vaccine. Check with your Doctor to find out if you are up-to-date with your immunisations.

### For further information please contact:



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