

Measles

Measles is a highly infectious viral illness. It can be very unpleasant and possibly lead to serious complications, including blindness and even death.

Anyone can get measles if they haven't been vaccinated or had it before, although it's most common in children aged between one and four years old.

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.

The virus spreads very easily, and measles is caused by breathing in these droplets or by touching a surface that has been contaminated with the droplets and then placing your hands near your nose or mouth.

The initial symptoms of measles include:

- cold-like symptoms
- red eyes and sensitivity to light
- fever
- greyish white spots in the mouth and throat

After a few days a red-brown spotty rash will appear. It usually starts behind the ears, then spreads around the head and neck before spreading to the legs and the rest of the body.

When to see your GP

Most childhood rashes are not measles, but see your GP if you notice the above symptoms and suspect it's measles. Measles is a notifiable disease, which means that any doctor who diagnoses the infection must inform the local health authority in order to identify the source of the infection and stop it spreading.

If you notice any additional symptoms while your child has measles, seek urgent medical attention.

Measles can be extremely unpleasant and can lead to complications such as meningitis and pneumonia. In very rare cases people have died from measles.

Treating measles

There's no specific treatment for measles and your immune system should fight off infection within a couple of weeks.

If your child has measles, there are several things you can do to help make them feel more comfortable, including:

- closing the curtains to help reduce light sensitivity
- using damp cotton wool to clean the eyes
- taking paracetamol or ibuprofen to relieve fever, aches and pains
- drinking plenty of water to avoid dehydration

In severe cases of measles, especially if there are complications, hospital treatment will be needed.

Although vaccinated children are unlikely to catch it, keep your child away from other children for at least five days after the rash has appeared.

Once you have fought off the measles infection, you develop immunity (resistance) to it.

MMR

The most effective way of preventing measles is the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine.

The first MMR vaccination should be given when your child is around 13 months old. A booster is given before your child starts school.

If your child is younger than 13 months and you think they may have been exposed to the measles virus, see your GP immediately. The MMR may be given if they are over six months old, or they may be given antibodies for immediate protection if they are younger than six months old.

Measles and pregnancy

If you're planning to get pregnant and you have not had measles, arrange with your GP to have the MMR vaccine.

If you catch measles during pregnancy, it can be passed on to your baby, which can be very damaging or even fatal to your baby. Measles in pregnancy can cause miscarriage, premature labour or a baby with low birthweight. The MMR jab cannot be given during pregnancy.