

## **Information about Measles (Rubeola)**

### **What is measles?**

Measles, also known as “Red Measles” or Rubeola, is a very easily spread respiratory infection caused by a virus. It usually occurs in young children, but anyone who is not protected can be infected with measles.

### **How can I get measles?**

Measles is spread through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of infected persons. Less commonly, particles from an infected person can stay in the air for long periods of time and infect others in the same room or in neighbouring rooms. Measles is one of the easiest viruses to spread from person to person. A person with measles can spread the disease from four days before to four days after the rash appears so people can pass the virus to others before they become ill.

### **Who is at risk of getting measles?**

Anyone who is not protected can get measles. Infants are most at risk because immunity passed from their mother at birth decreases after six months of age. College students and adults can also get measles if they were never immunized or their protection from previous immunization has decreased.

### **What are the symptoms of measles?**

Measles symptoms appear in two stages. During the first stage, those infected have a runny nose, red and watery eyes that are sensitive to light and a slight fever. The second stage begins after three to seven days when the fever increases usually becoming very high (103° to 105°F or 39.9° to 40.1°C). A red rash then develops, first on the face and then moving down the trunk, legs and arms. Small, white spots appear on the inside of the mouth (Koplik spots). These symptoms last about five days with the rash clearing on the face first and then the rest of the body. People with measles appear very sick.

### **How do I know if I have measles?**

A person has measles if they have the signs and symptoms of the infection. However, as measles is now rarely seen in Canada it is important to confirm each infection with lab tests ordered by a doctor.

### **If I have contact with the infection, how long does it take to get measles?**

Symptoms can appear from eight to 13 days after contact but usually appear in 10 to 12 days.

### **Can I get measles more than once?**

No. Once someone has had measles they are protected for life.

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## **What can happen if I get measles?**

Most people who get measles are sick for up to 10 days and then recover completely. Symptoms are more common and severe for infants and adults. Complications of measles include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling/inflammation of the brain), middle ear infections, seizures and convulsions. Pregnant women with measles can have premature delivery of their baby and miscarriages but measles does not cause birth defects. In Canada, people rarely die from measles. Once you have been sick with measles your body's ability to fight off other infections is decreased for several months.

## **How is measles treated?**

There is no specific treatment for measles. Supportive care in hospital may be needed for severe infections but most people infected with measles can recover at home. It is important to speak to a doctor before going to see one if you think you have measles so the infection is not passed on to others.

## **What can I do to prevent measles?**

People born before 1957 are considered protected from measles. Presently children receive two shots of measles vaccine, one after their first birthday and the other before they start school. Most adults born after 1970 had one shot of measles vaccine as an infant. They should get a second shot, especially if they are students at post-secondary institutions, military recruits or health care workers, or if they will be travelling to areas where they may be exposed to measles (such as most developing countries).

## **What can I do if I come into contact with someone who has measles?**

If an unvaccinated person comes into contact with someone who has measles there are two actions that can be taken to prevent infection. First, a shot of measles vaccine can prevent infection if given within 72 hours of contact with an infected person. Second, a shot of immunoglobulin, can be given if this is done within six days of coming into contact with an infected person. Immunoglobulin, a blood product containing antibodies that help prevent infection, is usually given to people at increased risk of severe complications from measles (e.g., infants, pregnant women). The use of measles immunoglobulin will greatly reduce the risk of measles infection after an unprotected person comes into contact with the disease.

## **How common is measles?**

Measles is rarely seen in Canada due to high rates of vaccination. Worldwide, an estimated 43 million people get infected with measles each year and more than one million people die from this disease.

## **Where can I find more information?**

Call **Toronto Public Health, Immunization Information Line at 416-392-1250**. This fact sheet can also be found on our Web site.

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