What is measles?

Measles is caused by a virus and is a very infectious disease that can be particularly serious in infants and adults. Although measles usually lasts only one to two weeks, it can cause such complications as pneumonia, ear infections, and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

What are the symptoms of measles?

The first symptoms of measles resemble a cold and appear about ten days after exposure to the virus. These include a cough, fever of 101 degrees or greater, runny nose, and red, watery eyes. The rash usually begins a few days later, around the ears and hairline, and spreads to cover the face, trunk, and arms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 8 to 12 days after exposure. The average time from exposure to appearance of the rash is 14 days.

How is measles spread?

Measles is a highly contagious disease. The virus is found in nose and throat secretions of infected people. Direct contact with these secretions or exposure to the cough or sneeze of an infected person can spread the disease.

How long can a person spread measles?

People infected with measles are contagious three to five days before the rash and at least four days after the rash appears.

How is measles diagnosed?

Diagnosis can be based on symptoms of an infected person. However, it is best to confirm the diagnosis by checking for measles-specific antibodies in a person's blood.

Who is at risk of getting measles?

Children less than 15 months of age who are too young to receive the vaccine; people born in or after 1957, who lack proper documentation of measles immunity; people who have not been vaccinated; and persons vaccinated before age one.
Is measles serious?

Individuals infected with measles frequently suffer from ear infections and/or pneumonia. About 1 in every 1,000 cases develops encephalitis. Death occurs in 1 of every 1,000 reported cases in the United States. Clearly, it is important to control the spread of measles.

How can measles be prevented?

1. By ensuring that children are vaccinated at appropriate ages.
2. People exposed to measles should check their immunization record or consult their physician or local health department to see if they need a protective vaccination.
3. People with measles should be separated from non-immune people. This includes exclusion from public settings such as day care centers, schools, or work.

Is measles vaccine safe?

Measles vaccine has an excellent record for safety. However, people with severe allergies to eggs (that is, people who have experienced hives, swelling of the mouth and throat, difficulty breathing, or shock after eating eggs), or people with disorders that suppress the immune system, should receive the vaccine only after they consult with their physician. Children with high fevers should have their vaccinations delayed until they have recovered. Women who are pregnant or who are considering becoming pregnant in the next three months should postpone receiving the vaccine.

What is the difference between measles (rubeola) and German measles (rubella)?

Measles (rubeola) is a serious disease and is sometimes called "hard", "red", or "seven day measles". Individuals infected with measles frequently suffer from ear infections and/or pneumonia. German measles (rubella) is a mild, three day infection that seldom leads to complications in children. However, rubella may cause birth deformities in babies born to mothers who are infected with the virus during pregnancy.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor
- Your local health department, listed in your telephone directory
- The Utah Department of Health, Immunization Program (801) 538-9450 or the Bureau of Epidemiology (801) 538-6191.

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