

Measles

Overview

Measles is a highly infectious disease that causes Conjunctivitis, Fever, and a distinctive red rash. It is caused by a virus and spread by inhaling droplets from sneezes or coughs and can start with cold-like symptoms. There may be a Fever, the eyes may be red and it can hurt to look at the light. These are followed a few days later by a rash that can be either raised or flat, that starts on the face and spreads down the body. It can join up to make large, red patches which can be itchy.

There is no treatment except making people comfortable.

It can lead to serious complications including Pneumonia, brain damage, and death.

In Australia death rates are low because of immunisation which prevents measles from developing. It is important to have children vaccinated against this condition.

If you have measles once, you cannot get a second infection.

Rubeola is an old name for measles (not to be confused with rubella).

Complications

Some of the complications of measles include:

- **Otitis media**- inflammation of the middle ear.
- **Diarrhoea and vomiting**- may cause further complications such as dehydration.
- **Respiratory infections**- such as Bronchitis, Croup or laryngitis.
- **Pneumonia**- a type of lung inflammation that causes about 60 per cent of measles deaths.
- **Pregnancy problems**- if a pregnant woman contracts measles, she risks Miscarriage or premature labour.
- **Encephalitis**- or brain inflammation, affects about one person with measles in every 1000. About 10 to 15 per cent of patients with Encephalitis die. About 15 to 40 per cent of survivors have permanent brain damage to varying degrees.
- **Subacute sclerosing panencephalitis (SSPE)**- occurs in about one in every 100,000 cases of measles. SSPE is an extremely rare progressive inflammation of the brain that causes loss of personality and intellectual disabilities. It usually begins about seven years after the measles infection.

Causes

Measles is caused by measles virus and is spread in secretions from the mouth and lungs when people cough or sneeze.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually start 8 to 12 days after being exposed to the virus.

The earliest symptoms can include:

Symptoms may include:

- Red eyes - it can hurt to look at the light
- Cough and runny nose
- Fever

- Small blueish, red or white spots inside the cheeks, opposite the back teeth, called Koplik spots.

- Aches and pains.

- A rash that starts on the face and spreads down the body.

The rash appears about two to four days after the first symptoms and has red spots that may be flat or slightly raised. With time, individual spots may join up to form large red areas. It can be itchy.

All up, people with uncomplicated measles are unwell for four to ten days.

However, people with measles can develop serious complications.

These include:

- Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis, which occurs in about 1 in every 1000 cases), which causes confusion and possibly coma and death.
- Middle Ear infection, which causes ear pain.
- Pneumonia, which causes cough with sputum, Fever, Chest pain, shortness of breath and possibly death.
- Gastroenteritis, causing vomiting and diarrhoea.
- Miscarriage or premature labour in a pregnant woman.
- Subacute sclerosing panencephalitis (SSPE), which is a rare chronic, progressive Encephalitis that starts years after the infection and is fatal.

The diagnosis can be confirmed with DNA tests of the urine or a swab from the back of the nose, or by taking blood tests looking for antibodies to the virus. A final answer may not be known for weeks.

Unfortunately, people are contagious a day or two before they develop any symptoms, making it very easy to pass the virus on.

Doctors who suspect measles must notify local health authorities.

Treatment

There is no cure for measles - it will run its own course. Treatment consists of making the child comfortable, for example, by encouraging them to rest and to eat and drink and by treating a Fever with children's paracetamol or children's ibuprofen. (If the child is not bothered by the Fever, it's safe to let the Fever run its course. Fevers do not, in themselves, require treatment.)

Children who require hospitalisation may receive vitamin A and the antiviral medication ribavirin. It's not known how effective these drugs are in reducing the duration and severity of the condition.

People who have been exposed to the virus within the last three days should be vaccinated to protect them from infection. If there is a good reason why vaccination cannot be given, such as Pregnancy, an alternative is an injection of immunoglobulin, which contains antibodies that protect against the virus.

People with measles should stay home from

school or work until the rash has been there for four days.

If you or your child are not immunised and may have been exposed to measles, you need to stay home until 14 days after the last person to get ill develops the rash.

Prevention is the best cure: measles vaccination is safe and is 99% effective at preventing measles.

The vaccination is called the MMR and it contains vaccines against mumps and rubella as well. It is given at 12 months of age and again at 4 years.

Support & online resources

Immunise Australia Program <http://immunise.health.gov.au>

- NSWHealth www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets
- Children, Youth and Women's Health Service www.cyh.com

It'sMyHealth