



Understanding measles

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What is measles?

Measles is a very serious and highly contagious illness that can cause severe complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), and even death.

Because of immunization, measles is now a rare disease in Canada. Most cases occur in unimmunized people, including visitors to Canada, who have traveled overseas. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect against measles. When you get immunized, you help protect others as well.

Infants under 12 months and unvaccinated adults are most at risk of severe illness or death.

Who is at risk?

You are at risk of getting measles if:

- You have never had measles, and
- You have not received 2 doses of a measles-containing vaccine after 12 months of age

How measles spreads

Measles is very contagious and spreads easily. When an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes, the virus spreads through the air. The measles virus can survive in small droplets in the air for several hours. You can become infected when you breathe in these droplets or touch objects contaminated with the virus. The airborne spread of the measles virus makes the disease very contagious. Sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, or kissing someone who has the virus can also put you at risk.

Symptoms of measles

Symptoms of measles include fever, cough, runny nose, and red and inflamed eyes that are often sensitive to light. These symptoms are followed by a rash, which starts first on the face and neck, and spreads to the chest, arms and legs. The rash lasts about 4 to 7 days. There may also be small white spots inside the mouth. Symptoms can start as soon as 7 days after a person is infected with the measles virus.

Measles vaccine information

There are 2 vaccines available in B.C. that provide protection against measles:

1. Measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine
2. Measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) vaccine

The vaccines are provided free as part of routine childhood immunizations and to others that need protection against measles. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #14a Measles, mumps, rubella](#)

[\(MMR\) vaccine](#) and [HealthLinkBC File #14e Measles, mumps, rubella and varicella \(MMRV\) vaccine.](#)

Measles vaccine for children

- Children get the first dose at 12 months and the second dose at 4-6 years (MMRV)

In B.C., children are routinely provided with two doses of a measles-containing vaccine with the first dose of measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine given at 12 months and the second dose of measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) vaccine given at 4 to 6 years.

- If travelling, kids 6–12 months may need an early dose before departure

Children from six months of age travelling to parts of the world where measles is more common can receive MMR vaccine prior to departure. They will then require two doses of vaccine after they reach 12 months to be fully protected.

- Children between one and 4 years can also get their second dose early if travelling to areas where measles is spreading

Measles vaccine for adults

- Adults born in 1970 or later need 2 doses of measles-containing vaccine (MMR).

Adults born in 1970 or later should ensure they have received two doses of a measles-containing vaccine as one dose is not enough to ensure adequate protection. Adults born before 1970 are generally assumed to have acquired immunity to measles from exposure to measles before immunization was widely available.

Vaccination and pregnancy

- Women should avoid becoming pregnant for one month after getting the vaccine. MMR is a live vaccine, so it is not recommended that pregnant women be vaccinated for measles until after they give birth. Everyone within the same household should be up to date on vaccinations to protect you and your baby
- If you are breastfeeding or chest feeding, the MMR vaccine is safe for you and the baby

New to Canada

- If you've just moved to Canada, it's important to make sure you have received all the [vaccines recommended for children](#) and adults in B.C. These vaccines might be different from those recommended in your home country
- If you are missing any recommended vaccines, you can receive these missing routine vaccines for free

Where to get vaccinated

- People can get free measles vaccines from their local health unit or health centre. Some doctors and nurse practitioners also offer vaccines to infants, children and adults. Call your health care provider to make an appointment
- Children 4 years and older, as well as adults, can be vaccinated at a pharmacy. To find a BC pharmacy with the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine: [BC Pharmacy Association: MMR Vaccine Clinic Locator](#)
- In First Nations communities, people can also be immunized by their community health nurse at their community health centre or nursing station
- If you are travelling to a country where measles is common, you can be vaccinated through a travel health clinic. To find a travel health clinic near you, visit the [HealthLink BC Directory](#)
- Visit the Government of British Columbia website for information on [Routine immunizations in B.C.](#) and learn how to [access and update your immunization records](#) via [Health Gateway](#).

- If you have more questions on measles and vaccinations, call [8-1-1](tel:8-1-1).
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Exposure to measles

If you've been exposed to measles and are not fully immunized:

- Get the MMR vaccine within 72 hours
- If you can't receive the vaccine (Infants under 6 months, pregnant individuals or people with weakened immune systems), you may be offered immune globulin within 6 days of exposure. Contact your local public health unit within 6 days to discuss immune globulin.
- If you have been exposed to the measles virus and have not had the disease or received 2 doses of a measles vaccine, you should get immunized to prevent the illness. You need to get the vaccine within 72 hours after exposure in order to be protected against the measles virus.

People born before 1970 may not need to get the vaccine as they have probably had measles.

Certain people should not get the measles vaccine. These include babies less than 6 months of age, pregnant people, and people with certain immune conditions. If you, or your child, are in one of these groups, please call your local Public Health team as soon as possible and no later than 6 days after being exposed. If you cannot get the vaccine in time or it is not recommended that you receive the vaccine, you may be given immune globulin for protection. Immune globulin contains antibodies taken from donated human blood. Antibodies are proteins that a person's immune system makes to fight germs, such as viruses or bacteria. Immune globulin provided within 6 days of being exposed to measles can protect against measles infections or make the illness less severe. This is also provided free of charge. For more information, please visit [HealthLinkBC File #63 Immune globulin](#).

For suspected measles cases in BC, make sure to read through [HealthLinkBC's Health alerts](#) where information on outbreaks and other advisories such as boil water advisories and product recalls from various trusted sources throughout British Columbia, in your local Health Authority area, and across Canada are highlighted. You can also visit your health authorities for up-to-date public health information in your communities.

What should I do if I think I have measles?

If you have a fever and rash, and think you may have measles, especially if you have been in contact with someone with measles or traveled to an area with a measles outbreak, have yourself examined by a health care provider. It is best to call ahead so that you can be seen quickly and without infecting other people. Measles can spread easily in places like waiting rooms and emergency rooms. The doctor or triage nurse can make sure that you are taken into a closed area for an examination and attend the clinic at a time when the waiting room is empty. Bring your immunization record with you. A physical examination, blood test, and throat swab or urine sample will be collected to make the diagnosis of measles.

How can I prevent spreading measles to others?

A person with measles can spread the virus to others from 4 days before to 4 days after their rash first appears. If you have measles, you can help prevent spreading it to others by:

- Staying at home for at least 4 days after the rash first appeared
- Washing your hands regularly
- Coughing or sneezing into a tissue or sleeve rather than your hands
- Not sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, or kissing others

Is there a home treatment?

After seeing a health care provider, the following home treatment tips may help you to be more comfortable while you rest and recover:

- Drink plenty of fluids such as water, juice and soup, especially if you have a fever
- Get plenty of rest
- Use acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (e.g. Advil®) to reduce fever or discomfort. Do not give Aspirin (ASA) to children under 18 (risk of Reye syndrome) and consult a healthcare provider before giving ibuprofen to children under 6 months

Featured topics

Health Authorities

Some health authorities provide information about measles and immunizations:

- [Fraser Health: Measles](#)
- [Interior Health: Get immunized](#)
- [Island Health: Immunizations](#)
- [Northern Health: Measles](#)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health: Measles](#)

Measles

- [Measles \(rubeola\)](#)
- [Measles rash](#)

Immunization

Getting immunized is the best way to protect you and your family from serious and sometimes deadly diseases. When you get immunized, you help protect others as well. [Learn more about immunizations in B.C.](#)

- [A better immunization experience for your child \(HealthLinkBC File #50e\)](#)
- [Childhood vaccines are safe \(HealthLinkBC File #50c\)](#)
- [The benefits of immunizing your child \(HealthLinkBC File #50b\)](#)
- [Your baby's immune system and vaccines \(HealthLinkBC File #50a\)](#)

Travel health

Getting immunized should be an important part of your travel plans.

To receive vaccines related to travel, contact a [travel health clinic](#). It is recommended that you phone ahead to ensure that they have vaccine in stock. Another important consideration is that most travel vaccines may not be covered by B.C.'s medical services plan which the clinic should be able to verify. For information on vaccines related to travelling outside of Canada, please visit:

- [Travel immunizations for adults \(HealthLinkBC File #41c\)](#)
- [Travel health](#)
- [Health advice for travellers \(HealthLinkBC File #41a\)](#)
- [Travelling with children \(HealthLinkBC File #41d\)](#)
- [The pregnant traveller \(HealthLinkBC Files #41g\)](#)
- [Travel health notices](#)

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C., visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.