

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.

Since the introduction of the measles vaccine, rates of measles infections have dropped significantly in Canada and around the world. However, recently there has been a very significant increase in measles cases in the province and across Canada. Most measles cases occur in unimmunized people, including visitors to Canada or those who have traveled to areas where measles is a concern. Getting immunized is the best way to protect against measles. When you get immunized, you help protect others as well.

People who are at greatest risk of contracting measles are those who are unvaccinated against the disease and who have no immunity from past exposures. Young children, people who are pregnant and people who are immunocompromised are most at risk of severe illness and complications.

Know the symptoms

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.

Who is at risk?

You are at risk of getting measles if:

- You have never had measles
- You have not been immunized against measles

People who have not had measles should receive 2 doses of a measles-containing vaccine after 12 months of age to be protected. People born before 1970 are assumed to be well-protected from infection as measles circulated widely then.

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 products that produce smoke (for example, cigarettes) or vapours (for example, e-cigarettes), or kissing someone who has the virus can also put you at risk.

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

Measles vaccine for children

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. Infants 6 to 11 months may need an early dose of MMR vaccine if they have been in contact with someone with measles or if they are going to be travelling. Children in this age group who are travelling to countries where measles is more common or to areas where outbreaks are happening can get the MMR vaccine to help protect them. This early dose does not count toward the regular vaccine schedule. They will still need 2 more doses—one at 12 months and another at 4 to 6 years of age—to be fully protected. Similarly, children under 4 years old, who are travelling to areas where measles is more common or to areas where outbreaks are happening, who have already had one dose of MMR vaccine can get their second dose early.

A [free, routine immunization schedule](#) is provided for children from two months to high school age (Grade 9). Following this schedule gives your child the best protection from many serious diseases.

Measles vaccine for adults

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. It is assumed that most adults born before 1970 already had measles, and most likely already have immunity. Health care workers born before 1957 are considered immune, but continue to be eligible for measles-containing vaccine if directed, to protect themselves and their patients who have a higher risk of infection.

Vaccination and pregnancy

Pregnancy should be avoided for one month after getting the MMR vaccine. MMR is a live vaccine, so it is not recommended that pregnant people be vaccinated until after they give birth. Everyone living with a pregnant person should be up to date on their vaccines to help protect the person who is pregnant and their baby.

The MMR vaccine is safe while breastfeeding or chestfeeding.

New to Canada

If you've 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.

How to get vaccinated

People can get 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 B.C. pharmacy with the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine [visit the BC Pharmacy Association: MMR Vaccine Clinic Locator](#).

In First Nations communities, people can 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](#).

Unsure if your child missed an immunization? Visit [Immunization schedules](#) for information on routine immunizations in B.C. and [learn how to access and update your immunization records](#) by using [Health Gateway](#). For most vaccines, it's never too late to catch up. There is a catch-up schedule that health care providers use to ensure children are protected as soon as possible. If you have more questions on measles and vaccinations, call [8-1-1](#).

Exposure to measles

For information on measles exposure locations in B.C. and what to do if you have been exposed to measles, visit BCCDC's [Measles Exposure and Self-Assessment Tool](#).

Some people who have been exposed to measles and who are not protected (e.g., not immunized, no history of infection), may be eligible for post-exposure prophylaxis (with MMR vaccine or immune globulin) to prevent infection if the exposure was within 6 days. These include children under 1 year of age, unimmunized pregnant people, and some people with weakened immune systems. If you, or your child, are in one of these groups, please call your local public health unit as soon as possible. It may be recommended that you get immune globulin for protection against measles. For more information, visit [HealthLinkBC File #63 Immune globulin](#).

For the current measles case count in B.C., visit BCCDC's [measles](#) page. 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. Please 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 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. People who are immunocompromised can spread the illness for longer periods. 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 as directed by public health

- Washing your hands regularly
- Coughing or sneezing into a tissue or sleeve rather than your hands
- Not sharing food, drinks or products that produce smoke (e.g., cigarettes) or vapours (e.g., e-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. Consult a healthcare provider before giving ibuprofen to children under 6 months of age. Do not give Aspirin (ASA) to children under 18 (due to the risk of Reye syndrome)

Measles vaccines remains the best way to protect people from serious illness.

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](#)