

Measles

Measles is a highly contagious disease that can be life threatening. Find out what the symptoms are and how immunisation can protect you and your family.

Summary

- Measles is highly contagious – and easily preventable.
- It affects both children and adults.
- 2 doses of the measles vaccine provides the most effective protection for yourself, your family and the wider community. After 2 doses of the MMR vaccine, more than 95% of people are protected from measles.
- In New Zealand, if you were born in 1969 or later, you can get the measles vaccine for free.
- Vaccination is particularly important if you are planning to travel anywhere overseas – to protect yourself and to help prevent outbreaks in New Zealand.

How measles spreads

Measles is a highly infectious virus that spreads easily from person to person through the air, via breathing, coughing and sneezing. It affects both children and adults.

If you catch measles you are infectious 5 days before and until 5 days after the rash appears.

Anyone with measles needs to be isolated from the time they become ill until 5 days after the rash has appeared. Isolation means staying at home and missing out on things like school, work, sporting competitions and social events.

It is extremely important to stay in isolation if you're asked to do so, to protect vulnerable people including babies, pregnant women, cancer patients and others who are unable to be immunised. If you are exposed to measles and can't prove that you're immune (for example, by showing your immunisation record), you'll need to be isolated for at least 14 days.

Schools and child care centres have the legal power to exclude unvaccinated children when there is a risk of measles being spread.

Measles complications

Measles can be life threatening: about 1 in 10 people with measles will need hospital treatment.

- Measles can also lead to other complications, including: ear infections (which can cause permanent hearing loss)
- Diarrhoea
- Pneumonia
- Seizures
- Swelling of the brain – this is rare, but can cause permanent brain damage or death.

Up to 30% of people with measles will develop complications – usually children under 5 and adults over the age of 20.

Measles during pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage, premature labour and low birth-weight babies.

Symptoms

The illness starts 7–18 days after you've been exposed. If you have measles, you'll get the following symptoms.

First symptoms

- A fever
- A cough
- A runny nose
- Sore and watery 'pink' eyes
- Sometimes small white spots on the back inner cheek of your mouth.

Day 3–7 of illness

A blotchy rash which tends to start on your face, behind the ears, before moving over your head and down your body. The rash lasts for up to a week.

What to do if you or a family member has symptoms

If you detect any of these symptoms, see your family doctor or call Healthline on 0800 611 116, for advice as soon as possible.

It's important to call before visiting your doctor because measles is easily passed on from one person to another. Phoning ahead helps ensure steps are taken to avoid you spreading measles in the waiting room.

You should also stay away from work, school or public places, to help prevent putting other people at risk. This also applies if you or a family member aren't fully immunised and may have been in contact with someone with measles.

Prevention

The best protection against measles is the free measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine. You need 2 doses of measles-containing vaccine to be fully immunised.

New Zealanders born from 1 January 1969 are eligible for free MMR vaccinations. If you were born before the measles vaccine became available in 1969, you are considered at lower risk because you were probably exposed to measles as a child.

People aged 10 to 29 years are at greatest risk of catching measles, as they're the group least likely to have been fully immunised as children.

If you're unsure of your vaccination status you can check your Well Child Tamariki Ora or Plunket book, or contact your general practice.

If you can't find your records, the Ministry of Health recommends you get vaccinated anyway – it's free, and there is no harm in having an extra dose of the vaccine.

Vaccination is particularly important if you are planning to travel anywhere overseas – to protect yourself and to help prevent outbreaks in New Zealand.

Get up to date with your immunisations

It's never too late to get up to date with your immunisations. By being immunised, you will not only be protecting yourself and your family – you'll also stop the disease spreading in your community.

- Young children are usually vaccinated at 15 months and 4 years of age.
- 2 doses are necessary to give the best protection.
- In an outbreak or other urgent situation, the first scheduled dose can be given from 12 months of age, with the second scheduled dose able to be given as early as 1 month after the first.
- In an outbreak, an additional dose of measles vaccine can be given from 6 months of age. Babies immunised before they are 12 months old will still need 2 doses according to the schedule (at 15 months and 4 years).
- Immunisation (with 2 measles vaccinations) is also very important for older children and adults. For more information about the vaccine, read the HealthEd resource Childhood Immunisation.

Who shouldn't have the vaccine?

You shouldn't get immunised against measles if you:

- Are pregnant
- Have a severe allergy or immunosuppressive condition.
- If you think you have been exposed to measles and are unable to have the vaccine, ask your doctor for advice.

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Ministry of Health
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