

Measles

What is measles?

Measles is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus; it can have more serious after-effects than many people realise. The complications can be dangerous, and so the illness should be taken seriously.

What are the symptoms?

For the first 3 days the patient is miserable with symptoms like a heavy cold—fever, runny nose, red and watering eyes and a dry, hacking cough. By the third day tiny white spots like grains of salt (called *Koplik's spots*) appear inside the mouth. On the fourth and fifth days a blotchy red rash appears. The rash starts behind the ears and on that day spreads to the face, the next day to the body and later to the limbs. By the sixth day the rash is fading, and after a week all the symptoms have disappeared. However, the rash can leave a pinkish red stain.

If a cough and red eyes are not present, the patient is unlikely to have measles.

How is it spread?

The disease is very infectious and is spread to other people usually by kissing, coughing and sneezing. Once inside the body the virus has an incubation period of about 10 to 14 days, and the patient is infectious for about 5 days before and 5 days after the rash appears.

What are the risks?

Most patients make a good recovery with lifelong immunity from further attacks, but some get complications from bacterial infections affecting the ear or chest.

There is a small but important risk of getting encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), which can lead to permanent brain damage. For this reason, immunisation of all the population is an important aim of health authorities.

What is the treatment?

The patient should rest quietly, avoid bright lights and stay in bed until the fever has settled. Any high fever should be treated with tepid sponging and paracetamol.

The nasty cough can be controlled with a cough linctus. However, there is no specific treatment and no special drug for measles. Antibiotics are not effective against viral infections, but are used if complications such as ear infections and pneumonia develop.

School exclusion

Children should be kept away from school until they have recovered or for at least 5 days from the appearance of the rash.

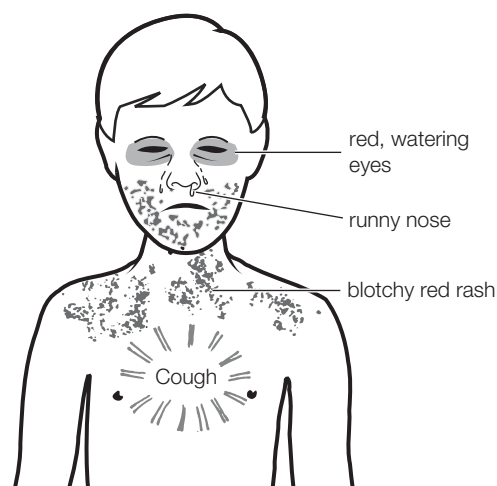
What should you do?

- Notify your doctor if any unusual problems develop, including severe constant headache, a stiff neck, convulsions, breathing problems, unusual drowsiness or earache.
- Notify school authorities.

How can measles be prevented?

A vaccine against measles is available and recommended to be given to children at 12 months and once more prior to school entry at 4 to 5 years. It is combined with the mumps and rubella vaccines.

All children should be vaccinated against measles. The vaccine is free.



Typical symptoms of measles