

# Measles Information Sheet

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## *What is it?*

Measles is a highly infectious disease that affects children and adults. It is caused by a virus that spreads easily from person to person through the air, via breathing, coughing and sneezing. You can be immunised against measles which means you cannot catch the measles virus.

## *What are the signs and symptoms?*

Symptoms of measles generally appear within 14 days of exposure to the virus.

Symptoms include:

- cough
- fever
- red eyes
- light sensitivity
- muscle aches
- runny nose
- sore throat
- white spots inside the mouth
- widespread skin rash. The rash can last up to seven days. It usually develops at the head and slowly spreads to other parts of the body.



If you have these symptoms or suspect you might have measles you need to see a doctor. The doctor may take samples for testing. Ring ahead to tell the

receptionist or nurse about your symptoms. This will mean the practice can ensure steps are taken to avoid you spreading measles in the waiting room.

The virus and symptoms usually disappear within 2-3 weeks.

It is not possible to have measles more than once. Once you've had measles you are considered immune.

## *How serious is it?*

Measles is very serious. Around 1 in 10 people with measles end up in hospital with problems caused by measles. The most serious problems include blindness, encephalitis (an infection that causes brain swelling), severe diarrhoea (pronounced dy-a-rea, is runny poo), dehydration, ear infections, severe respiratory infections such as pneumonia and even death. The risk of problems and death are higher in children under 5 years and adults over 20 years of age.

Measles is a notifiable disease under the Health Act. This means your doctor must tell the District Health Board (DHB) if they suspect you have it. A Communicable Disease Nurse will contact you or your family for information to help stop other people from getting measles.

## *Who is most at risk?*

Unimmunised young children are at highest risk of measles and the problems caused by measles. Unimmunised pregnant women who get measles are at risk of miscarriage and early labour. If you have not been immunised or have not had measles in the past, you can become infected.

People who have had a bone marrow transplant or who are undergoing chemotherapy or anyone who has a weak immune system is at greater risk of very

serious problems from measles. These people are often unable to be immunised. They need everyone around them to be immunised against measles to help protect them from getting the disease.

### *How could I get infected?*

The measles virus can be spread in the air breathed by an infected person. The virus can stay in the environment for up to 2 hours after the infected person has gone. The virus can also be spread by sharing eating utensils.

One person with measles can pass the disease on to 12–18 people who do not have immunity.

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

### *How do I protect myself and others?*

Immunisation is the best way to prevent measles. In New Zealand immunisation is FREE from your doctor or nurse.

A Communicable Disease Nurse from the DHB will advise you if you have had contact with an infected person and what you should do to protect yourself and others.

To find out if you or a member of your family is fully immunised (had two doses of the MMR vaccine) you can check your Well Child / Tamariki Ora book. You can also ask your doctor or practice nurse, or Communicable Disease Nurse to help you find out.

### *What vaccine will protect me?*

The combined measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine was introduced into New Zealand in 1990. The MMR vaccine is the only vaccine available in New Zealand to prevent measles.

Two doses of the MMR are recommended after the age of 12 months, given at least four weeks apart.

After the first dose of the MMR 90–95% of people will be protected against measles, i.e. 5–10 people out of every 100 immunised could still get measles. After the second dose almost everyone is protected. Pregnant women should not receive the MMR vaccine.

### *Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?*

- Children or adults who are either suspected or confirmed measles cases will need to stay at home and away from work, preschool, school and public places and avoid people without immunity to measles until at least 5 days after the appearance of the rash.
- People without immunity to measles should stay at home because of the risk of catching the disease themselves and the risk of passing on the disease.
- Those who have been exposed to measles and are not immune will need to stay at home and away from work, preschool, school and public places and avoid people without immunity to measles for up to 14 days.
- People with immunity to measles can go anywhere as they would normally.

### *How is it treated?*

There is no medication to treat measles. Immunisation is the best protection.

### *Where can I get further information?*

For further information on measles please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.

For more information on immunisation go to [www.immune.org.nz](http://www.immune.org.nz).