

# MEASLES

It isn't just a little rash

**According to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) a measles outbreak has now been declared in all the provinces in South Africa except for the Eastern Cape. Measles is not a harmless childhood disease. It spreads incredibly easily. In fact, 9 out of 10 people who are not vaccinated, will get it if they are near an infected person.**



## What is Measles?

Measles (also called rubeola) is a very contagious respiratory infection. It causes a total body skin rash and flu-like symptoms. Measles is caused by a virus, there is thus no specific medical treatment for it. The virus has to run its course. A patient who is sick should drink plenty of liquids, get lots of rest, and stay home to prevent spreading the infection.

## What are the Signs and Symptoms of Measles?

A case of measles usually includes the following symptoms of which the first symptoms usually appear 10 to 12 days after infection: a runny nose, hacking dry cough and a fairly high fever. The eyes also become red and sensitive to light. Unfortunately, because of those early symptoms, people might at first think they have a common cold.

The danger is that all that time the infected person is contagious with measles and could unknowingly be spreading their infection to others.

As the illness progresses, on the third to seventh day, the temperature may reach 39 to 41 °C, and a red rash appears that lasts four to seven days. Once the rash appears, it starts on the face and spreads to the trunk (back and chest/stomach) and outward to the arms and legs. Usually, the rash does not spread to palms of the hands or soles of the feet. The rash itself is macular (flat) and erythematous (red).

Sometimes the rash will gather to form larger "splotches". Patients can also have a rash in their mouth, called Koplik spots, which are whitish in appearance and usually line the insides of the patient's cheeks.



## How do People get Measles?

Measles spreads when people breathe in or have direct contact with virus-infected fluid. It can pass through droplets sprayed into the air when someone with measles sneezes or coughs. Someone exposed to the virus usually shows symptoms 7-14 days later.

People with measles can spread the disease from 4 days before the rash starts until about 4 days after. They're most contagious while they have a fever, runny nose, and cough. Those with weakened immune systems can spread the measles virus until they recover.

## How is Measles Treated?

There is no specific medical treatment for measles. To help manage symptoms:

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Encourage extra rest.
- Treat the fever. Never give aspirin to a child who has a viral illness, as such use is linked to Reye's syndrome.

## How long does Measles last?

A measles infection can last for several weeks. Patients with measles should be kept away from others for 4 days after their rash appears. For those with a weakened immune system, this should continue until they make a full recovery and all symptoms are gone.

The virus can survive in air for about 2 hours, so people should minimise contact with the infected person and stay out of the room where they're resting. This is particularly important for patients who are young, old, pregnant, or have a weakened immune system.

## Can Measles be Prevented?

Yes, it is a preventable disease. Measles vaccination protects you and your family. By vaccinating against measles, you contribute to a healthy community. An unvaccinated person who is exposed to measles has a 90% probability of becoming sick. This is regardless of age and the strength of her or his immune system. Vaccination is the only measure that prevents infection.

The two-dose measles-mumps-rubella vaccine (MMR) is about 97% effective at preventing infection. Therefore, if an individual has been vaccinated appropriately, it is unlikely that they could contract measles, but not impossible.

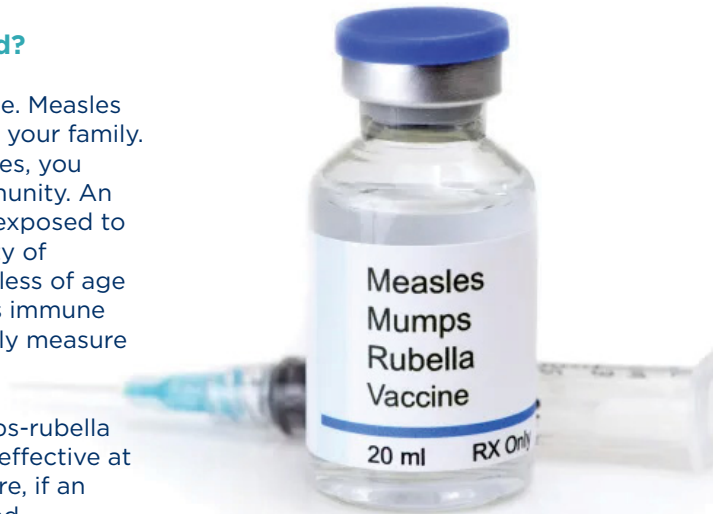
For most kids, measles protection is part of the MMR vaccine given when they're 12 to 15 months old and again when they're 4 to 6 years old. It's important for all kids who can get the vaccine to get it on schedule.

At-risk people (such as those with weakened immune systems) can't get the vaccine and depend on "herd immunity". This is when a lot of people are immunised against a disease, which prevents it from spreading and helps prevent outbreaks.

## When should I consult the Doctor?

Consult the doctor right away if you think that someone has measles. Also consult if your child or an adult was around someone who has measles, especially if the patient:

- is an infant
- is taking medicines that suppress the immune system
- has tuberculosis, cancer, or a disease that affects the immune system





## Why is vaccination important?

Widespread immunisation has made measles rare. But outbreaks do still happen. An outbreak is when a disease happens in greater numbers than one would expect in a certain area. Measles outbreaks have been increasing worldwide, mostly due to people not being vaccinated.

At highest risk during a measles outbreak are:

- infants who aren't old enough to get the vaccine
- pregnant women
- people with poor nutrition or weakened immune systems

**Now to calm some alarm:** Just because someone is having a viral rash or symptoms of a cold, that does not mean they have a measles infection. That's unlikely to be the case. However, as with all uncommon things in medicine, doctors need to be vigilant and diagnose the condition, especially since measles cases have cropped up again.

**Let this be the point that puts measles on your radar:** Since patients can be contagious up to five days before the rash starts and remain contagious four days after the rash appears, and since measles is highly contagious and has the potential to spread rapidly before anyone even recognises there may be an outbreak, it's clear why vaccination against this preventable disease is so important. This is especially critical to protect the health of patients who cannot be vaccinated.

Sources:

[www.nicd.ac.za/south-african-measles-outbreak-update-2023-9-march](http://www.nicd.ac.za/south-african-measles-outbreak-update-2023-9-march)  
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