

Get the Facts: Measles

The Western United States is dealing with a significant measles outbreak, with cases in more than a dozen states. The Chicago Department of Public Health is dedicated to providing information to residents and their families to ensure the health of individuals and the community. This fact sheet provides basic information about measles and how residents can best protect themselves and their children.

What is measles?

Measles is a serious respiratory infection that causes a rash and fever. It is very contagious. Measles can be dangerous, especially for babies and young children. For some children, measles can lead to pneumonia (a serious lung infection), lifelong brain damage or deafness. In rare cases, it can be deadly.

What are the symptoms?

Measles starts with a fever that can get very high. Some of the other symptoms that may occur are cough, runny nose and red eyes, diarrhea or rash of tiny, red spots that start at the head and spread to the rest of the body.

How is measles spread?

It is very contagious. Measles spreads when a person infected with the measles virus breathes, coughs or sneezes. You can catch measles just by being in a room where a person with measles has been, up to 2 hours after that person has left. And you can catch measles from an infected person even before they have a measles rash. Almost anyone who has not had the vaccine or a prior infection will get measles if they are exposed to the measles virus.

How can I protect myself and my child?

The best way to protect against measles is to get the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine (called the MMR vaccine). Adults who are not sure if they have had the vaccine or if they had a prior measles infection, should contact their medical provider.

Doctors recommend that most children get the first dose of the MMR vaccine at the age of 12 to 15 months and a second dose at 4 to 6 years of age. The MMR vaccine protects your child from measles, and also against mumps and rubella. For those who travel internationally, all individuals older than 6 months should receive the MMR vaccine. Talk with your health care professional about protecting your baby at least 4 weeks prior to departure. Infants who are too young to be vaccinated should avoid contact with sick people or situations where they may be exposed to sick people.

How many cases of measles are there in Chicago?

Between 2005 and February of 2015, there have only been three confirmed cases of measles in Chicago. Most individuals in Chicago are protected from measles because they were vaccinated as children. However, some children under the age of 12 months, individuals with certain allergies, or weakened immune systems may not be able to receive the vaccine.

Is the MMR vaccine safe?

Yes. The MMR vaccine is very safe, and it is effective at preventing measles (as well as mumps and rubella). Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. But most children who get the MMR vaccine have few side effects. Most commonly, people complain of fever, pain or redness at the site the vaccine was given.

Is there a link between the MMR vaccine and autism?

No. Scientists in the United States and other countries have carefully studied the MMR vaccine. None has found a link between autism and the MMR vaccine.

What should I do if I'm unsure whether I or my child is immune to measles?

If you are unsure whether you or your child has received the MMR vaccine, contact your healthcare provider to discuss your child's or your immunization records. If you do not have a healthcare provider, you can call 311 to locate a CDPH immunization clinic where MMR vaccine is provided at no cost to the individual.