

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



HEALTH DIVISION

Department of Health & Human Services

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Smallpox

What is Smallpox?

Smallpox is a serious, contagious, sometimes fatal disease caused by the variola virus.

How do you get Smallpox?

Smallpox is spread from direct face-to-face contact with an infected person. Smallpox also can be spread through direct contact with infected bodily fluids or contaminated items such as bedding or clothing. Persons with Smallpox are contagious with the onset of rash until all scabs have fallen off (approximately 3 weeks). The most contagious period is the first 7 -10 days after the rash appears.

How long after exposure until the first signs of illness appear?

Smallpox symptoms and rash begin on average 12 to 14 days after exposure. Onset of illness can begin anywhere from 7 to 17 days after exposure.

What are the symptoms of Smallpox?

Symptoms begin with high fever (101° to 104° Fahrenheit), tiredness, head and body aches. About 2-4 days later small red spots will develop on the tongue and in the mouth. They develop into sores that break open. Around this time a rash will appear on the face, arms, legs, hands and feet. At first the rash is red and flat, then becomes raised and forms a blister filled with a yellowish-white infectious fluid that forms a crust then scabs by the end of the second week. During the third week after the rash appears, scabs start to separate and fall off. Most scabs will have fallen off three weeks after the rash appears. Once all scabs have fallen off the person is no longer contagious.

What are the complications of Smallpox?

The majority of people with Smallpox recover. Death occurs in up to 30% of cases. Many Smallpox survivors have permanent scars, especially on the face. Smallpox may also cause keratitis (inflammation of the cornea of the eye), and blindness in 1% of the cases. Infection in pregnancy can cause the infant to be born with the Smallpox and may cause infant death.

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What is the treatment for Smallpox?

There is no proven treatment for Smallpox. Patients with Smallpox can benefit from supportive therapy like IV fluids, medicine to control fever or pain) and antibiotics for any secondary bacterial infections that may occur.

Can Smallpox be prevented?

Smallpox can be prevented by vaccination. The vaccine can lessen the severity of or even prevent illness if given within 4 days after exposure. Routine vaccination against Smallpox ended in 1972. The level of protection, if any, among persons who were vaccinated before 1972 is uncertain; therefore, these persons are assumed to be susceptible.

For more information on Smallpox, call (248) 858-1406 or toll free 1 (800) 848-5533.

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