

Measles: What you need to know

Measles is a highly contagious and potentially serious disease caused by a virus. Two doses of measles-containing vaccine provide life-long protection against infection and the potentially serious consequences of the disease.

Before the introduction of widespread vaccination, major epidemics occurred approximately every 2–3 years and caused an estimated 2.6 million deaths globally each year. While vaccination has drastically reduced this number, the virus continues to circulate, and in 2021, an estimated 128,000 people lost their lives to measles. In 2023, measles is on the rise in the WHO European Region.



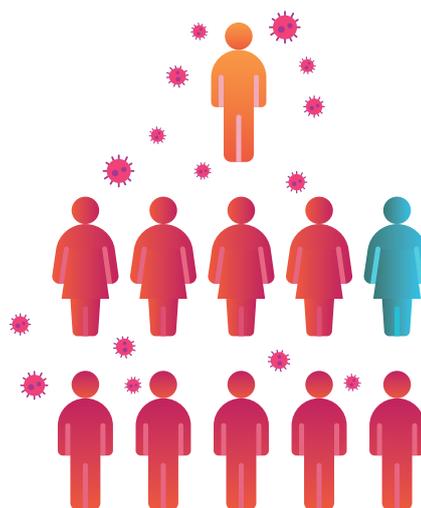
The only way to stop measles is to prevent it through vaccination

Measles vaccination is safe and effective. Around 99% of people who receive 2 doses of the vaccine will be protected for life. 95% vaccination coverage, in every population every year, will prevent measles from spreading and causing large outbreaks, and will lead to elimination of the disease.

How does measles spread?

Measles is normally spread through direct contact and through the air. The virus infects the respiratory tract, then spreads throughout the body.

The measles virus can live for up to 2 hours on a surface or in the air. If other people breathe in the contaminated air or touch the infected surface and then their eyes, nose or mouth they can become infected. An infected person can spread the virus even before they have any symptoms. The virus is so contagious that 90% of unimmune people who come into contact with an infected person will become infected and develop the disease.



Is it dangerous?

Like many infectious diseases, measles usually starts with a high fever followed by a runny nose, cough, red and watery eyes. But there are also specific small white spots inside the cheeks. After several days, a painful rash erupts, eventually spreading to the whole body.

In most cases, measles infection clears in 7 to 10 days, but about 1 in 5 people will develop more serious complications, such as ear infection, deafness, blindness, pneumonia, encephalitis (brain swelling) or even death. Measles infection has also been shown to weaken a person's immune system, making it more difficult to fight off other pathogens for months to even years.

Any non-immune person (who has not had the disease before, not been vaccinated or was vaccinated but did not develop immunity) can become infected. Serious complications are more common in children under the age of 5 and adults over the age of 30. Non-immune women who become ill with measles while pregnant are at risk of miscarriage or premature labour, and low birth weight infants.

Measles outbreaks can be particularly deadly in countries experiencing or recovering from a natural disaster or conflict. Damage to health infrastructure and health services interrupts routine immunization, and overcrowding in collective settings (such as residential camps during emergencies) can greatly increase the risk of infection.

