

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Smallpox

What is Smallpox?

Smallpox is a contagious disease caused by a virus.

How do you get Smallpox?

Smallpox is spread from person to person through coughing and sneezing. Persons with Smallpox are most likely to spread the disease during the first week of illness. However, it may be contagious until all scabs have fallen off (approximately 3 weeks).

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

Generally Smallpox symptoms and rash will begin 7-14 days after exposure.

What are the symptoms of Smallpox?

Initial symptoms appear to be flu-like with high fever, tiredness, head and back aches. About 2-4 days later a rash will develop on the face, arms, and legs at the same time. At first the rash is red and flat, then becomes raised and forms a blister filled with a yellowish-white infectious fluid that crusts over early in the second week. About 3-4 weeks later, scabs develop, separate, and fall off.

What are the complications of Smallpox?

Most people with Smallpox recover. Complications of Smallpox may be: encephalitis (infection of brain tissue), keratitis (inflammation of the cornea of the eye), and blindness in 1% of the cases. Death occurs in up to 30% of cases. Infection in pregnancy can cause the infant to be born with the infection and may cause infant death.

What is the treatment for Smallpox?

There is no proven treatment for Smallpox. Strict isolation of persons with Smallpox must be done to prevent the spread of the disease. Patients can spread Smallpox until all scabs have separated.

Can Smallpox be prevented?

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. The vaccine can lessen the severity of or even prevent illness if given within 4 days after exposure.

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