

Measles: 7 things parents must know

Measles was declared "eliminated" from the U.S. in 2000, but it's back in a big way. The Centers for Disease Control says 2011 is shaping up to be the worst year for measles outbreaks since 1996. What can you do to keep your children safe? Keep clicking to read answers to common questions about measles...

What does measles look like?

Most cases begin with fever, cough, runny nose, red eyes, and a sore throat. Two or three days after symptoms begin, tiny white spots (doctors call them Koplik's spots) may appear inside the mouth. The infamous blotchy rash typically appears three to five days after the start of symptoms. It usually begins on the face at the hairline, and then spreads all over the body.

How serious is measles?

Measles can kill but only very rarely. For every 1,000 kids who get measles, only one or two die. But measles can cause a number of potentially serious complications. About 10 percent of kids with measles develop an ear infection, and about 8 percent develop diarrhea - in some cases severe enough to require hospitalization. Measles can also lead to a encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain that can cause convulsions - and which can leave kids deaf or mentally retarded.

How does measles spread?

The virus that causes measles lives in the mucus in the nose and throat of infected people. When infected people sneeze, the spray of droplets may contain measles virus - and can be breathed in by other people in the area. The virus can also live on surfaces for a couple of hours. Measles is extremely contagious. If one person has it, nine out of 10 people who are close to that person will get it too - unless they've been vaccinated.

Where does measles come from?

Although widespread vaccination has dramatically reduced the number of cases in the U.S., measles remains a very common disease in many countries. In the U.S., about half of all measles cases are "imported" by U.S. residents returning from visits to foreign countries. That's why it's so important for adults and children - even kids as young as six months of age - to be vaccinated before traveling abroad.

Is the vaccine safe?

Some parents worry about vaccinating their kids against measles and other childhood diseases because they fear the vaccine can cause autism. But studies involving thousands of children have found no connection between the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. There are risks of allergic reactions and seizures from being vaccinated, but these are very small - far less worrisome, the CDC says, than coming down with measles.

How is measles treated?

There's no specific antiviral drug for treating measles. The CDC recommends "supportive" care, including bed rest, using a humidifier, and taking the fever reducing medicine acetaminophen (Tylenol). making sure your child is well-hydrated and giving him/her "antipyretic" fever reducing medication. There's some evidence that vitamin A supplements can be helpful in some children - ask your doctor.

Where are the outbreaks occurring?

The outbreaks are occurring across the nation, as shown on the map below. The CDC says there have been 118 cases of measles from Jan. 1 through May 20, 2011. Eighty-nine percent of these cases were "imported" from other countries.

