

# Measles

## What is measles?

Measles is a highly infectious viral illness, which can cause serious disease. Measles is now uncommon in Australia because of high levels of immunisation. Since 2000 each year in Australia case numbers of measles have ranged from 10 to 340, with almost all identified in travellers or linked to returned travellers. In the Northern Territory since 2000 there have been 0 to 54 cases per year with the global interruption of childhood immunisation programs due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increasing cases of measles reported worldwide.

## How is it spread?

Measles is spread by breathing in airborne droplets from the coughs and sneezes of people infected with the disease. Measles is one of the most highly infectious communicable diseases. In Australia most measles infection originates from returned overseas travellers or from foreign visitors who can then spread the infection to non-immune individuals.

## Who is at risk?

People who are not immune either by vaccination or previous infection are at risk of measles infection.

## Signs and symptoms

The symptoms of measles are fever, cough, runny nose and sore eyes, which usually occur about 7 to 10 days (but may take up to 21 days) after exposure to a case followed by a red, blotchy rash 2 to 4 days later. The rash starts on the face and spreads down the body. Up to a third of people with measles will experience a complication. Complications are more common in young children and in adults. Complications include ear infections, diarrhoea and pneumonia, and may require hospitalisation. About one in every 1000 people with measles develops encephalitis (infection of the brain).

## Infectious period

A person with measles is infectious from 24 hours before the onset of the first symptoms until 4 days after the appearance of the rash. A person is most infectious in the 24 hours before the rash appears and therefore before measles is suspected.

## Prevention

The best protection against measles infection is vaccination and people should receive 2 measles-containing vaccines. In Australia the vaccine is available as a combination vaccine containing measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) or measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV). All children are currently recommended to get vaccinated for measles at 12 and 18 months of age as part of the National Immunisation Program. Infants can be vaccinated against measles from six months of age if traveling overseas, or when an outbreak happens, but will still need two more doses at 12 months and 18 months.

People who were born before 1966 were most likely exposed to measles and are considered immune. All people who were born after 1966 should have evidence of either receiving 2 measles containing vaccines or evidence of having had the disease (by a blood test). It is important for all overseas travellers to ensure that they are immune to measles.

No measles-containing vaccine should be given during pregnancy or to women contemplating pregnancy. Pregnancy should be avoided for 28 days after vaccination.

Disease in non-immune people exposed to measles can be prevented by administration of a measles-containing vaccine if given within 3 days of exposure, or by administration of immunoglobulin within 7 days of exposure for people with high risk of complications from measles. See the [Measles contact information](#) fact sheet.

## Treatment

There is no specific treatment for measles. People with measles should have plenty of fluids and rest and treat symptoms as they occur. While the person remains infectious it is important that they stay at home to reduce the risk of spreading the disease to other people.

## Where can I get vaccinated?

The free vaccine is available from your community health centre, Aboriginal medical service and most general practitioners.

## How is measles controlled?

People who have measles should stay at home until they are no longer infectious which is usually 4 days after the onset of the rash. Doctors, hospitals, laboratories, schools and childcare centres must notify cases of measles to the local Centre for Disease Control. This is so that people at risk of infection can be identified and control measures can be implemented to prevent further spread of the virus.

## Related information

[Measles contact information](#)

## Contact

For more information contact the Public Health Unit's Centre for Disease Control in your region.

The full list of contacts of contacts can be found at [NT Health](#).

Location	Address	Phone	Fax	Email
Darwin	Ground Floor, Building 4 Royal Darwin Hospital Rocklands Drive Tiwi NT 0810	(08) 8922 8044 1800 008 002	(08) 8922 8310	<a href="mailto:CDCSurveillance.DARWIN@nt.gov.au">CDCSurveillance.DARWIN@nt.gov.au</a>
Katherine	O'Keef House Katherine Hospital Gorge Road Katherine NT 0850	(08) 8973 9049	(08) 8973 9048	<a href="mailto:CDC.Katherine@nt.gov.au">CDC.Katherine@nt.gov.au</a>
Tennant Creek	Schmidt Street Tennant Creek NT 0860	(08) 8962 4259	(08) 8962 4420	<a href="mailto:CDC.Barkly@nt.gov.au">CDC.Barkly@nt.gov.au</a>
Alice Springs	Disease Control Unit Lower Ground Floor Eurilpa House, 25 Todd Street Alice Springs NT 0870	(08) 8951 7540	(08) 8951 7900	<a href="mailto:CDC.alicesprings@nt.gov.au">CDC.alicesprings@nt.gov.au</a>
Nhulunbuy	Corner Mathew Flinders Way and Chesterfield Court Nhulunbuy NT 0880	(08) 8987 0357	(08) 8987 0500	<a href="mailto:CDCGove.DoH@nt.gov.au">CDCGove.DoH@nt.gov.au</a>