Measles

This sheet is about having measles in a pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This information is based on published research studies. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is measles (rubeola)?

Measles (rubeola) is a viral disease. It is an infection caused by a virus called Morbillivirus.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Common symptoms of measles are rash, very high fever, cough, runny nose, and red watery eyes. Some people with measles also have headaches, chest pain, breathing problems, ear infections, and diarrhea.

Symptoms of measles usually start 7 to 14 days after being exposed to the virus. The first symptoms are usually fever, cough, runny nose, and red, watery eyes.

2 to 3 days after symptoms start: tiny white spots (Koplik spots) might appear inside the mouth.

3 to 5 days after symptoms start: skin rash can appear. The rash can look like flat red spots or raised bumps. The skin rash usually starts on the face near the hairline and then spreads to the neck, torso, arms, legs, and feet. The skin rash usually lasts 5 to 6 days.

Measles is a serious condition for anyone who becomes infected. However, some people may be at higher risk for more serious symptoms. These severe symptoms can include pneumonia (infection of the lungs) and encephalitis (infection of the brain). People at higher risk of complications from measles are pregnant women, children under the age of 5 years, adults over the age of 20 years, and people with a weakened immune system.

How do you get measles?

Measles is very contagious. The measles virus can stay in the air for up to 2 hours after an infected person has sneezed or coughed. Since the virus can stay in the air, measles can infect people even when the infected person is no longer in the area. Up to 9 out of 10 (90%) of susceptible people (those who have not had measles or the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine) are expected to get measles if they have been around an infected person or in the same place an infected person has recently been. A person infected with measles can spread the virus to other people 5 days before the rash appears until 4 days after the rash is gone. Once a person has been infected with measles, it is rare for them to get sick from the virus again.

How can I reduce my chances of getting measles?

The best ways to protect yourself against measles is to be vaccinated. MotherToBaby has a sheet on the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine here: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/measles-mumps-and-rubella-mmr-vaccine/.

Other ways to reduce your chances of getting measles:

- Avoid others who are sick with measles
- Avoid crowded areas if a measles outbreak is taking place near you
- Wash your hands well with soap and water
- Other people living in the home should also be vaccinated.

I have measles. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?
It is not known if having measles can make it harder to get pregnant. However, women who are sick with measles typically do not feel well and might be less likely to try to conceive a pregnancy at that time.

Does having/getting measles increase the chance of miscarriage?
Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Infection with measles during pregnancy can increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does having/getting measles increase the chance of birth defects?
Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like measles, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. Having measles is not expected to increase the chance of birth defects.

Fever is a possible symptom of measles. A high fever in the first trimester can increase the chance of certain birth defects. Acetaminophen has been recommended to reduce fever in pregnancy. If you get sick with measles and develop a fever, talk with your healthcare provider to confirm if taking acetaminophen is okay for you. For more information about fever and pregnancy and acetaminophen, see the MotherToBaby fact sheets https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/hyperthermia-pregnancy/ and https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/acetaminophen-pregnancy/.

Would having/getting measles increase the chance of other pregnancy related problems?
Having measles during pregnancy can increase the chance of preterm delivery (birth before week 37), low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth), and stillbirth (fetal death after 20 weeks). A measles infection near the time of delivery might also increase the chance of the baby being born with the infection, although this is thought to be rare.

Does having/getting measles in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?
It is not known if having measles in pregnancy increases the chance of behavior or learning issues for the child.

What screenings or tests are available to see if my pregnancy has birth defects or other issues?

Prenatal ultrasounds can be used be used to screen for some birth defects and to monitor the growth of the pregnancy. Talk to your healthcare provider about any prenatal screenings or testing that are available to you.

Breastfeeding while I have measles:
If you have measles, talk to your healthcare provider about the best ways to prevent the spread of illness to your breastfed baby. If you suspect that your baby has any symptoms of measles, contact the child's healthcare provider right away. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man has measles, can it affect his fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?
Studies have not been done to see if having measles could affect male fertility (ability to make healthy sperm) or increase the chance of birth defects. In a man has measles he can pass the virus to a pregnant woman through close contact.

In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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