

Fact Sheet: Smallpox

What is Smallpox?

Smallpox is a serious contagious disease caused by the variola virus. There are two types: variola minor and the more severe and more common form, variola major. There is no specific treatment for smallpox and the only prevention is vaccination. The last case of smallpox in the United States was in 1949; the last naturally occurring case in the world was in Somalia in 1977. Since then, a limited supply of the virus has been stored in just a few medical research laboratories. After the disease was eliminated in the world, routine vaccination against smallpox was stopped.

How is it spread?

- Generally through direct and fairly prolonged face-to-face contact with an infected person.
- Smallpox can also be spread through direct contact with infected bodily fluids or contaminated objects such as bedding or clothing.
- Smallpox is not transmitted by insects or animals.

How is the disease treated?

- There is no proven treatment for smallpox, but it can be prevented with smallpox vaccine.
- Vaccination within 3-4 days of exposure to the smallpox virus will prevent or significantly reduce smallpox disease symptoms in most people.
- Patients with smallpox can benefit from supportive therapy (IV fluids, medicine to control fever or pain), antiviral medications and antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections that may occur.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have gathered millions of doses of smallpox vaccine in case of an emergency.
- These supplies can be transported within hours to help control an outbreak of the disease.

What are the symptoms?

- High fever (101-104°F)
- Fatigue
- Head and body aches
- Sometimes vomiting
- Rash appears 2-4 days after fever starts
- The incubation period is 7-17 days
- The infected person is sometimes contagious as soon as they have a fever, but are most contagious once the rash develops (first week).
- The rash starts out as small, red spots on the tongue and in the mouth; they become sores that break open and spread the virus into the mouth and throat. At this point, the person becomes the most contagious.
- The rash appears on the face, spreads down the arms and legs and then on to the trunk (chest, abdomen and back).
- On the third day the rash becomes raised bumps that fill with pus and feel round and firm to the touch.
- The bumps crust over and then a scab forms (end of second week of rash).
- Most of the scabs will fall off within 3 weeks of the rash appearing.
- The person is contagious until all of the scabs have fallen off.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

