Measles Exposure with a Weakened Immune System

This handout will answer common questions about measles for people with a weakened immune system.

Measles is a **virus that spreads very easily through the air**. It can cause serious illness. People with weakened immune systems can get very sick from measles.

If your immune system is weak, you may:

- Get sicker from measles.
- Not have the usual rash.
- Need special treatment after exposure.

This includes people who have had transplants, cancer treatment, immune-suppressing medicines, or high-dose steroids.

Protection From Measles
You are usually protected if **one** of these is true:

- A blood test shows you have measles protection (measles IgG).
- You were born **before 1957**.
- You got the **MMR vaccine**.
    - 1 dose if you were 1 year old to kindergarten age.
    - 2 doses if you were in kindergarten or older.

Some people vaccinated long ago or outside the U.S. may not be fully protected unless a blood test shows immunity.

Measles (MMR) Vaccine
The measles/MMR vaccine is a **live vaccine** and is often **not safe** for people with weak immune systems.

Do not get this vaccine unless your UW doctor says it is safe for you.

Prevention

- Avoid contact with individuals with known or suspected measles
- Wear a tight-fitting mask (N95 or KN95 is best) in crowded indoor places.
- Ask people you live with to be fully vaccinated.
- There are no medicines to prevent measles. Vitamin A does not prevent measles.
- **Do not stop your normal medicines** unless your doctor tells you to.

Exposure
You may have been exposed if:

- You were **in the same room or building** as someone with measles while they were contagious (from 4 days before to 4 days after their rash started).
- You went into a room within **2 hours after** a person with measles left.

You can also check for known exposure places through your local health department.

If You Have Been Exposed
Your healthcare team will look at:

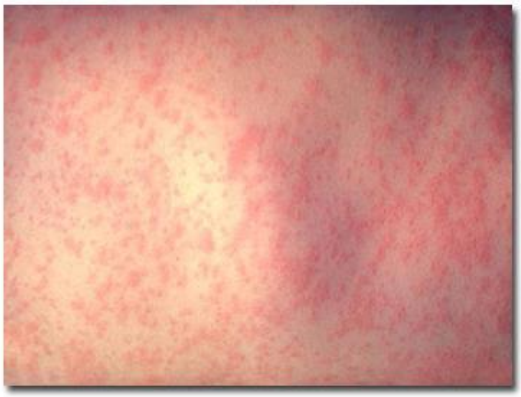
- When the exposure happened.
- Whether you are protected from measles.
- How weak your immune system is.

Some people may need **medicine after exposure** to lower their risk. Public Health will tell you if you need to stay home (quarantine).

Symptoms
Symptoms may start **7 to 21 days** after exposure. Symptoms include:

- High fever
- Cough
- Runny nose
- Red or itchy eyes
- Rash (often starts on the face and spreads down)

Some people with weak immune systems may **not get a rash**.



Healthwise® image

Feeling Sick After Exposure

- **Call before going** to a clinic or emergency room.
- Staff will tell you where to go safely.
- Wear a **mask** at all times. N95 or KN95 is best.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 7/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF# 8527.