

Variola

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What is Smallpox?

Smallpox is a serious, contagious, and sometimes fatal viral infectious disease. There are two clinical forms of smallpox. Variola major is the severe and most common form of smallpox with a more extensive rash and higher fever. Variola minor is a less common presentation of smallpox and a much less severe disease.

Who gets Smallpox?

Smallpox is no longer seen as a disease anywhere in the world. This disease has been eradicated because of successful worldwide vaccination. The last case of smallpox in the United States was in 1949. The last naturally occurring case in the world was in 1977. After the disease was eliminated from the world, routine vaccination against smallpox among the general public was stopped because it was no longer necessary for prevention.

If Smallpox is no longer a health threat why should I be concerned?

After the events of September and October 2001 there is increased concern that the smallpox virus could be used as an agent of bioterrorism. The U.S. government is taking precautions for dealing with the reappearance of this disease.

What are the symptoms of Smallpox?

The first symptoms of smallpox are the following:

- High fever, head and body aches, tiredness, and sometimes vomiting. The fever may reach 101 to 104 degrees. At this time people are usually too sick to carry on their normal activities.
- A rash appears first as small red spots on the tongue and in the mouth. A rash then appears on the skin, starting on the face and spreading to the arms and legs and then to the hands and feet. Usually the rash spreads to all parts of the body within 24 hours.
- The rash becomes raised bumps and the bumps become fluid filled. These are raised, usually round and firm to the touch as if there is a small object under the skin.
- The blisters begin to form a crust and then scab.
- The scabs fall off leaving pitting scars.

How is Smallpox spread?

Smallpox can be spread in several ways:

- Prolonged face-to-face contact with someone who has smallpox (usually someone with the rash). This was how most people became infected with smallpox in the past. However, a person can be exposed to someone who has smallpox and not become infected.
- Direct contact with infected bodily fluids or an object such as bedding or clothing that has drainage from the skin lesions and contains the smallpox virus.

- On rare occasions, the virus has spread through the air in enclosed places such as buildings, buses, and trains.

Smallpox is not known to be spread by insects or animals. The smallpox virus is not strong and is killed by sunlight and heat.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms can appear between seven and seventeen days, the average time is twelve to fourteen days, after coming in contact with the virus that causes smallpox. During this time, the infected person feels fine and is not contagious.

Is a person with Smallpox contagious?

Yes, a person with smallpox is contagious. The infected person is sometimes contagious with the beginning of fever, but the person becomes most contagious with the beginning of the rash. The infected person is contagious until the last smallpox scab falls off.

Is there a vaccine for Smallpox?

A vaccine was used to eradicate the disease from the world. Since the events of 2001 and the threat that smallpox may be used as a bioterrorism agent, the vaccine has again become available. The smallpox vaccine is being administered to military personnel, first responders, and health care personnel. It is currently not recommended for the general public; however, in the event the public requires vaccination there are supplies available.

How is Smallpox treated?

There is no proven treatment for smallpox. Supportive care (intravenous therapy, medication for fever or pain control) is offered to the ill individual. Research is currently being conducted to evaluate the use of antiviral medication in the treatment of smallpox.

How can Smallpox be prevented?

Smallpox can only be prevented through vaccination. If a case of smallpox is identified anywhere in the world, a medical emergency would exist. A decision on the need to vaccinate the general public would then be determined. Again, there is a stockpile of smallpox vaccination readily available for a situation such as this.

Want more information?

Information about Smallpox and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.

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