

Kent County Health Department Smallpox Fact Sheet



What is smallpox?

Smallpox is a serious and sometimes deadly disease caused by the variola virus. It is marked by a fever and a distinct skin rash.

How do people get infected with smallpox?

Smallpox normally spreads from contact with infected people. Generally, direct and fairly prolonged face to face contact is needed to spread smallpox from person to person. It is also spread through contact with infected body fluids from smallpox sores and things like bedding and clothing of a person with smallpox. This kind of indirect spread is less common. Rarely, smallpox has been spread by virus carried in the air in enclosed settings such as buildings, buses and trains. Smallpox is not known to be spread by insects or animals.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

The first symptoms of smallpox are:

- High fever
- Head and body aches
- Sometimes vomiting

After two to four days a rash develops in the mouth and throat. The rash spreads to the face and then to the arms, legs and other areas of the body. The rash turns into bumps that fill with pus, then crust, scab and fall off in about three weeks.

How soon do infected people get sick?

It usually takes between 12 and 14 days for symptoms to show, but it can range between seven and 17 days. During this

time, an infected person feels fine and is not contagious.

Can smallpox be spread from person to person?

Yes, smallpox is spread from person to person by close face to face contact. A person can spread smallpox to others from the time the rash starts until all of the scabs fall off.

If I am exposed to smallpox, is it too late to get the vaccine?

Vaccination within three days of exposure will completely stop or really weaken smallpox in most people. Vaccination four to seven days after exposure should give some protection from the disease or may weaken it.

How is smallpox treated?

There is no proven treatment for smallpox. Medicines can be used to treat symptoms like fever and pain.

Can a person die from smallpox?

The majority of people with smallpox recover. Many will have permanent scars over large areas of their bodies especially their face. Some people may be left blind.

Is there a smallpox vaccine?

The last naturally occurring case of smallpox in the world was in 1977. The vaccine has not been given since 1982. The U.S. Government restarted vaccination after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. People who are at highest risk of a smallpox attack are being vaccinated.

Smallpox Fact Sheet – page 2

Should I get the smallpox vaccine?

- If an outbreak occurs, yes a person should get the vaccine regardless of the health risks.
- Presently, the U.S. Government is not recommending vaccination of the general public.
- In the event of an outbreak, mass vaccination plans are being developed.

Are there some people who shouldn't get the vaccine?

In the event of an outbreak, vaccination will be recommended to essentially everyone.

At present, some people (military personnel, health care and emergency workers, etc.) will have vaccination recommended.

Two out of every one million people vaccinated die from the vaccine. Because of the risks linked with the vaccine, the following groups should not be vaccinated if no outbreak is present:

- pregnant women,
- people with immune system problems, like
 - people with HIV/AIDS,
 - people getting cancer treatments, and
 - people who have had organ transplants
 - people with eczema or atopic dermatitis (or a history of either)
 - people who have had a heart attack, or have angina, congestive heart failure or cardiomyopathy

Also, the following people should not get the vaccine:

- women who are breastfeeding

- people who are allergic to the vaccine or any of its ingredients,
- people who have a moderate or severe short-term illness,
- people under the age of 18, and
- people living with someone less than a year old.

How dangerous is the smallpox threat?

The deliberate release of smallpox as an epidemic disease is now regarded as a possibility. Smallpox is classified as a Category A agent by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Category A agents are considered the highest threat to national security due to their ease of transmission and high rate of death or serious illness. Just one confirmed case of smallpox would be considered a public health emergency.

Would enough vaccine be available in the event of a bioterrorism attack involving smallpox?

The United States currently has enough vaccine to vaccinate every single person in the country in an emergency.