



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department
SMALLPOX
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

Pre-rash

The first signs are much like the flu:

- sudden onset of fever
- tiredness
- severe back pain
- sometimes stomach pain
- vomiting

This can last 2-3 days, and at this time smallpox will become highly contagious to others.

Rash

As the fever begins to drop and the people begin to feel better, a rash will develop in the nose and mouth. The rash becomes bumps that spread to the face, hands, and forearms, and then spread to the stomach and legs. The bumps may even be on the palms of the hands and on the soles of the feet. Scabs will form and then separate. They will fall off after about 3-4 weeks.

How is smallpox spread?

In most cases, smallpox is spread from one person to another by saliva droplets from a person who is sick with smallpox. It has to be close contact with the ill person. People with smallpox are most likely to get other people sick during the first week of illness. However, you can still make people sick until all scabs have fallen off. Clothing or bed linen that may have come in contact with smallpox could also spread the



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virus. Special safety measures need to be taken to ensure that all bedding and clothing is cleaned well, use bleach and hot water. Disinfectants such as bleach and ammonia can be used for cleaning contaminated surfaces.

If someone comes in contact with smallpox, how long does it take to show symptoms?

It takes about 12 days (range: 7-17 days) after having close contact with someone who has smallpox until you start seeing symptoms. The first symptoms include high fever, fatigue, and head and back aches. A rash, mostly on the face, arms, and legs, follows in 2-3 days. The rash starts with flat red sores that spread at the same rate. Sores become pus-filled after a few days and then begin to crust early in the second week. Scabs form and then separate and fall off after about 3-4 weeks.

How safe is the smallpox vaccine?

The smallpox vaccine is the best protection you can get if you come in contact with the smallpox virus. However, the vaccine does have some risks.

What are the risks of the smallpox vaccines? Are there side effects?

Side effects from successful vaccines, mostly in those getting their first dose of vaccine, include:

- Tenderness, redness, swelling, and a sore at the vaccination site.
- May cause fever for a few days and the lymph nodes in the vaccinated arm may become enlarged and tender. These symptoms are more



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common in those receiving their first dose of vaccine (15% - 20% of those vaccinated) than in those being re-vaccinated (5% - 10% of those vaccinated).

The overall risks of serious problems from the smallpox vaccine are low, and occur more frequently in those receiving their first dose of the vaccine, and among young children.

- The most frequent serious problems are (brain swelling), death of skin and other tissues at the vaccination site, and severe and destructive infection of the skin affected already by a chronic skin disorder.

How to care for the vaccination site:

The spot that you received the vaccine will become sore, it is important to keep it clean and covered for the first few days after the vaccination. Because the virus is "live", you can spread it to other people and to other parts of your own body.

What will my vaccination site look like?

A bump will develop in about 3 days. Over the next 3 weeks, it will become larger and will eventually turn into a scab and fall off.

Is smallpox fatal?

The majority of patients with smallpox recover, but death may occur in up to 30% of cases.



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If someone is exposed to smallpox, is it too late to get vaccinated?

If the vaccine is given within 4 days after exposure to smallpox, it can lessen the severity of illness or even prevent it.

If people got the vaccination when it was available in the past, will they be immune?

Not necessarily. It is not clear how long protection from the smallpox vaccination lasts. Most experts believe that protection from the vaccination lasts 3-5 years. Persons who were vaccinated before 1972 may have some protection against smallpox, but it is uncertain. This means that the U.S. population has partial immunity at best. Immunity can be boosted with a single shot. Routine vaccination against smallpox ended in 1972.

Steps that can be taken at home:

- Some risk of transmission lasts until the scabs have fallen off. Contaminated clothing or bed linen could also spread the virus.
- Special precautions need to be taken to ensure that all bedding and clothing of patients are cleaned properly with bleach and hot water. Disinfectants such as bleach and ammonia can be used for cleaning contaminated surfaces.