



Smallpox Fact Sheet

What should I know about smallpox?

Smallpox is an acute, contagious, and sometimes fatal disease caused by the variola virus, and marked by fever and a distinctive progressive skin rash. In 1980, the disease was declared eradicated following worldwide vaccination programs. However, in the aftermath of the events of September and October, 2001, plans are in place to deal with a bioterrorist attack using smallpox as a weapon.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

The symptoms of smallpox begin with high fever, head and body aches, and sometimes vomiting. A rash follows that spreads and progresses to raised bumps and pus-filled blisters that crust, scab, and fall off after about three weeks, leaving pitted scars.

How is smallpox spread?

Smallpox normally spreads from contact with infected persons. Generally, direct and fairly prolonged face-to-face contact is required to spread smallpox from one person to another. Smallpox also can be spread through direct contact with infected bodily fluids or contaminated objects such as bedding or clothing.

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

After exposure, it takes between 7 and 17 days for symptoms of smallpox to appear (average incubation time is 12 to 14 days). During this time, the infected person feels fine and is not contagious.

When is a person with smallpox contagious?

A person with smallpox will have a fever and be quite ill for several days before the rash appears. A person is not contagious until the rash begins. The infected person is contagious until the last smallpox scab falls off.

Is there any treatment for smallpox?

Smallpox can be prevented through use of the smallpox vaccine. There is no proven treatment for smallpox, but research to evaluate new antiviral agents is ongoing. Patients with smallpox can benefit from supportive therapy (e.g., intravenous fluids, medicine to control fever or pain) and antibiotics for any secondary bacterial infections that may occur.

Is smallpox fatal?

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

What is the smallpox vaccine?

The vaccine is made from a virus called vaccinia, which is another "pox" type virus related to smallpox. The vaccine cannot cause smallpox. The vaccine helps the body develop immunity to smallpox.

Should I get vaccinated against smallpox?

The smallpox vaccine is not available to the general public at this time.

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

Vaccination may prevent or decrease the severity of disease in the vast majority of persons.

How long does a smallpox vaccination last?

Past experience indicates that the first dose of the vaccine offers protection from smallpox for 3 to 5 years.

*For further information, contact the Oklahoma City-County Health Department
(405) 425-4437*