



Smallpox

What is smallpox?

Smallpox was a serious, contagious and sometimes fatal infectious disease. It was caused by the variola virus. The virus no longer exists naturally, but lab stockpiles do exist. The last naturally occurring case was in Somalia in 1977. However, there is a concern that smallpox might be used as an agent of bioterrorism.

Does smallpox affect animals or pets?

No.

How is smallpox transmitted?

Generally, direct and prolonged face-to-face contact is required to spread smallpox. It may also be spread through direct contact with infected bodily fluids or objects, such as bedding or clothing. Rarely, smallpox has been spread by virus in the air in enclosed settings. Smallpox is not known to be spread by insects or animals.

A person with smallpox is most contagious when the rash begins and remains contagious until the last scab falls off.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

- Incubation period: Once a person is exposed to the virus, there is a period of seven to 19 days when the person feels fine and has no symptoms. During this time, the person is not contagious.
- Prodrome phase: The first symptoms include fever, tiredness, head and body aches and sometimes vomiting. The fever is usually high, from 101° to 104° Fahrenheit. The person is too sick to carry on normal activities. This phase may last for two to four days. An infected person may be contagious during this phase.
- Early rash: A rash begins, first as small red spots on the tongue and in the mouth. These spots develop into sores that break open and spread large amounts of virus into the mouth and throat. As this point, the person is the most contagious. A rash will then begin on the skin, starting on the face and spreading to the arms, legs, hands and feet. The fever usually falls and the person may start to feel better. By the third days of the rash, the rash becomes raised bumps. By the fourth day, the bumps fill with a thick, opaque fluid, with a depression in the center that looks like a bellybutton. The fever often rises again and stays high until scabs form over the bumps.
- Pustular rash: The bumps become pustules – sharply raised, round and firm to the touch. It may feel like a BB pellet is under the skin. This phase lasts about five days. The person is still contagious.
- Pustules and Scabs: The pustules begin to form a crust and then scab. By the end of the second week after the rash appears most of the sores have scabbed over. The person is still contagious.
- Resolving Scabs: The scabs begin to fall off, leaving marks on the skin that become pitted scars. By the end of the third week after the rash began, most scabs will have fallen off. The person is still contagious to others until all of the scabs have fallen off.
- Scabs resolved: Scabs have fallen off. The person is no longer contagious. However, permanent scarring is visible.

Is there any treatment for smallpox?

There is an antibiotic available for smallpox. Vaccine given within four days of exposure can prevent infection or help ease the severity of the disease.

What about the smallpox vaccine?

Vaccination is the only prevention for smallpox. The risk of negative side effects is dangerous enough that vaccine should only be given when the risk of exposure to smallpox is high.

For more information about smallpox or the smallpox vaccine call the Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health at (336) 641-7777 or visit our website at www.guilfordcountync.gov or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov

Free language assistance is available upon request.