

Measles & Pregnancy

Questions & Answers



TOI TE ORA
PUBLIC HEALTH

Women who are pregnant should find out if they are immune to measles, if unsure:

- Check your immunisation records in your Plunket/Well Child book if you or your parents can find it or ask your family doctor.
- If you have had a MMR vaccination or measles infection, it is extremely unlikely that you will catch measles. You are considered immune.
- If you do not know that you are immune, and you are in a community at risk, you can get a blood test to find out if you are immune.
- Pregnant women who know they are not immune can lower their risk by not going out to public places, and by ensuring everyone visiting or living with them is vaccinated.

Should pregnant women be worried?

The majority of pregnant women are likely to be vaccinated with at least one MMR, and some would have had measles. People in their 30s and 40s are likely to have been given one dose as young children. A second dose was offered at age 11 from 1992, then at age 4 from 2001. Lower vaccination rates in the past mean that people aged 15 to 29 are less likely to have been vaccinated as children than other age groups. This means they are less likely to be immune. We suggest that you check your immunity by asking your doctor about your vaccination records, or look in your Plunket/Well Child book if you or your parents have this. You can also talk to your lead maternity carer (your midwife or obstetrician). They will be able to tell you if you have been tested for rubella, and in New Zealand, if you are immune to rubella, you are usually immune to measles, as it's the same measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination.

How at risk are pregnant women?

Pregnant women are at the same risk as anyone else of catching measles in this outbreak. If you are exposed to the virus in close quarters, by family members at home or in a work or social space, you are more likely to catch it than if out in public.

What are the risks of measles in pregnancy?

Non-immune women who become ill with measles while pregnant are at risk of miscarriage, premature labour and low birth weight infants. Unlike rubella, there is no evidence of congenital malformation associated with measles in pregnancy.

What should pregnant women do if they do not know whether or not they are immune to measles?

You can talk to your lead maternity carer (your midwife or obstetrician) or your doctor. They will be able to tell you if you have been tested for rubella, and in New Zealand, if you are immune to rubella, you are usually immune to measles, as it's the same measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination. If you are in a high risk community or are a close contact, it is important that you have a serology test. If this is positive, you are considered immune and you do not need to take any other action. If the serology test is negative, then you are likely not to be immune. You can reduce the risk of getting measles by limiting going to public places, and ensuring all family members you see, plus any visitors, are immunised with MMR.

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What do I do if I've only had one of the two MMR vaccine doses?

One dose of MMR vaccine protects about 95 percent of people, and two doses protect about 99 percent. One MMR is considered sufficient protection. Pregnant women should not receive the MMR vaccine.

What happens if I am exposed to measles during pregnancy?

If you are pregnant and know you have come into contact with someone who has confirmed measles, you should discuss this with your Lead Maternity Carer (LMC) or doctor. Most pregnant women are immune through previous vaccination, no further action will be required. If you are not sure, your LMC or doctor can arrange for you to have a blood test to check your immunity. You will not have to pay for the test if you have been exposed to measles. If a blood test shows that you are not immune, then you may be able to have a treatment (normal human immunoglobulin) to reduce the risk of getting measles. You should discuss this with your doctor or LMC as soon as possible because there is a time limit on when it can be administered. You will also need to be in quarantine for up to 2 weeks, whether you are able to have treatment or not. If you are likely to go into labour in the next 3 weeks, you should also discuss a birth plan with your LMC. This means that they can be sure that anyone around you during your labour and delivery is immune. This helps to protect other mums and new babies in delivery suites and maternity units.

What happens if I am pregnant and catch measles?

Measles symptoms include a high fever, runny nose, cough and sore red eyes, followed by a rash that starts on the face and neck, and then spreads to the rest of the body a few days later. If you think you have measles, it's important to seek medical advice from your doctor. But ring before visiting your doctor to avoid spreading the virus in the waiting room. When you get to the health centre or hospital, stay in the car and call (or send in whoever is with you) to let them know you've arrived. You can also call Healthline for free health advice: 0800 611 116. Healthline operates 24/7 and has a translator service available.

How soon after birth can I get vaccinated?

As soon as you can, you do not need to wait. It is a good way to protect your new baby. You can be immunised while breastfeeding.

What advice is there for parents of new babies?

Babies under 6 months old are too young to be vaccinated. Babies will still have some protection from the antibodies from their mother for a few months, if the mother is vaccinated. If measles is currently circulating in the community, try to avoid large crowds or events. There is less risk in wide open spaces such as parks. You may also want to check those in the household and extended family have been vaccinated if your child is around them. If you are not immunised and you live in a high risk communities, your doctor may be able to vaccinate your baby after six months of age, but they will still need two more MMR doses at 15 months and at 4 years.

I am trying to get pregnant, what should I do?

If you know you are not immune, have an MMR vaccination before you get pregnant. You should wait a month before trying to get pregnant. Otherwise have a blood test to determine if you are immune, however you may have to pay for this test.

