

How you can protect yourself and your family from measles

By Dr. Megan Littlefield

Measles is a highly contagious and serious viral illness once eradicated in the U.S. In 2025 so far, there have been over 200 cases and 2 deaths due to an outbreak in Texas and New Mexico, as well as cases in 10 other states, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

The disease is especially dangerous for babies and young children. 79% of the cases and most of the hospitalizations nationwide in 2025 are children under 19 years old. 94% of the cases this year are in people who are unvaccinated.

The outbreak raises concerns that it could spread to other states, including Montana. Montana has not had a case of measles since 1990, and as of March 13, there are no cases reported in the state.

Because of the success of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, many people have never witnessed or experienced how serious the measles can be.

More than “just a rash”

Measles can result in severe health complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), and death, particularly in unvaccinated people. Measles typically begins with a fever, cough, runny nose and conjunctivitis (pink eye), lasting two to four days before rash onset. The incubation period for measles from the time of exposure to fever ranges from seven to 12 days, while rash onset is typically seen seven to 21 days after initial exposure.

The virus is spread through direct contact with infectious droplets or by airborne spread when an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes. Measles is so contagious that up to 90% of non-immunized people exposed to an infected person will become sick. The virus can remain infectious in the air and on surfaces for up to two hours after an infected person leaves an area. People infected with measles are contagious from four days before the rash starts through four days afterward.

Immunization: The best line of defense

Measles is almost entirely preventable through vaccination. MMR vaccines are safe and highly effective. Two doses are 97% effective against measles, and one dose is 93% effective.

Children are routinely recommended to receive two doses of MMR vaccines. Children should receive their first dose of MMR at age 12 to 15 months and their second dose at four to six years.

Unvaccinated children and adolescents can still be vaccinated and can receive two age-appropriate doses of MMR vaccine.

Unvaccinated adults may need one or two doses of MMR vaccine, depending on their circumstance, if they do not have evidence of immunity. People born before 1957 are considered to have presumed immunity.

If you're experiencing fever and rash and are concerned that you may have been exposed to measles, call your health care provider or emergency department first to tell them you are worried about measles so they can plan for your visit.

People planning to travel internationally or to an area of the U.S. experiencing an outbreak or working in a health care setting may be eligible for special vaccine schedules, so it is best to check with your health care provider about the timing of your immunization

To schedule an immunization at the RiverStone Health immunization clinic, go to [RiverStoneHealth.org/Immunizations](https://www.RiverStoneHealth.org/Immunizations) to schedule online or call 406-247-3382. If you are uninsured, the vaccines may be available at no cost.

Dr. Megan Littlefield is a pediatrician and internal medicine physician and the chief medical officer at RiverStone Health. To schedule an appointment at the RiverStone Health Clinic, call 406-247-3350.