

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Smallpox



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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What was smallpox?

Smallpox is a contagious viral disease that causes a progressive skin rash. Through the use of vaccines, smallpox was eliminated from humans in the late 1970's and is no longer a threat. Before a vaccination and eradication campaign finally brought an end to smallpox transmission, the disease was found worldwide.

Is there a risk of getting smallpox today?

Currently, there are only 2 known stocks of smallpox virus, which are held in Atlanta, Georgia and in Russia. Samples are kept in very secure laboratories, and maintained for scientific and research purposes. There is no documented evidence of this existence outside the secure laboratories.

How is smallpox spread?

Smallpox is very contagious and spreads from person to person by infected saliva droplets. Exposure may come from close personal contact (e.g., kissing), airborne spread (e.g., coughing or sneezing), or through direct contact with the smallpox virus.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

The first symptoms of smallpox usually appear 12 to 14 days after a person becomes infected. Symptoms included high fever, fatigue, headache, and backache. A rash, mostly found on the face, arms, and legs, follows two to three days after the high fever. The rash starts out flat then becomes pus-filled and begins to scab in the second week. The scabs separate and fall off in three to four weeks, leaving deep, pitted scars. Smallpox can result in death. Smallpox is not contagious until the beginning of the rash (two to three days after fever starts).

How is smallpox treated?

No cure for smallpox exists. In the event of an infection, treatment would focus on relieving symptoms and keeping the person from becoming dehydrated. Antibiotics might be prescribed if the person also develops a bacterial infection in the lungs or on the skin.

Is there a smallpox vaccine and should I get one?

There is currently an emergency supply of the smallpox vaccine that could be used to prevent the spread of smallpox should it be released into the environment. In the United States, routine vaccination against smallpox ended in 1972 because the disease was eliminated. Vaccination of the general public is not recommended at this time.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse, or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/smallpox
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548
- The New Jersey Department of Health website at www.nj.gov/health

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