

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Smallpox



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is smallpox?

Smallpox is a contagious viral disease (variola virus) that causes a progressive skin rash. Through the use of vaccines, smallpox was eradicated, and no cases of naturally occurring smallpox have happened since 1977. The last natural outbreak of smallpox in the United States occurred in 1949.

How is smallpox spread?

Before smallpox was eradicated, it was mainly spread by direct and fairly prolonged face-to-face contact between people. Smallpox patients became contagious once the first sores appeared in their mouth and throat (early rash stage). Smallpox can be spread:

- Through an infected person's droplets (when coughing or sneezing)
- Through the scabs of an infected person
- Through the fluid found in an infected person's sores
 - Can be spread if an object is contaminated with the sores or fluid from the sores

Rarely, smallpox has spread through the air in enclosed settings, such as a building (airborne route). Smallpox can be spread by humans only. Scientists have no evidence that smallpox can be spread by insects or animals.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

A person with smallpox goes through several stages as the disease progresses. Each stage has its own signs and symptoms, which will last approximately one month from start of symptoms.

- Incubation Period
 - Infected but does not look or feel sick (no symptoms)
 - Can last 7 to 19 days
 - Not contagious during this time
- Initial Symptoms
 - High fever, head and body aches, sometimes vomiting
 - Can last 2 to 4 days
 - Sometimes contagious during this time
- Early Rash
 - Small red spots on the tongue and in the mouth
 - Change into sores that break open and spread the virus into the mouth and throat
 - Fever continues
 - Sores spread to all parts of the body within 24 hours
 - Fever begins to decline
 - May start feeling better
 - Can last about 4 days
 - Most contagious during this time
- Pustular Rash and Scabs
 - Sores become pustules (sharply raised, usually round and firm to touch)
 - After about 5 days, the pustules scab
 - By the end of the second week after the rash appears, most of the sores have scabbed over
 - Lasts about 10 days
 - Contagious during this time
- Scabs Fall Off
 - Scabs begin falling off, leaving marks on the skin

- Three weeks after rash appears, most scabs will have fallen off
 - Lasts about 6 days
 - Contagious during this time
- No scabs
 - Four weeks after rash appears, all scabs should have fallen off
 - Once all the scabs have fallen off, a person is no longer contagious

How is smallpox treated?

There is no proven treatment for smallpox, but some antiviral drugs may help treat it or prevent it from getting worse.

Is there a risk of getting smallpox today?

Smallpox has been wiped out and no one has gotten smallpox since 1977. Though, it is possible the variola virus (the virus that causes smallpox) could be used in a biological attack. 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.

Is there a smallpox vaccine and should I get one?

Currently, the smallpox vaccine is not available to the general public because smallpox has been eradicated, and the virus no longer exists in nature. However, there is enough smallpox vaccine to vaccinate every person in the United States if a smallpox outbreak were to occur.

Where can I get more information?

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