



South Central Public Health District

Prevent. Promote. Protect.

1020 Washington Street North • Twin Falls, ID 83301
208-737-5900

SMALLPOX INFORMATION SHEET

Should I be vaccinated?

Smallpox infection was eliminated from the world in 1977, but recent events in the United States have increased awareness of the need to be prepared in case of a biological attack. The federal government is **not recommending** vaccination for the general public at this time. Licensed vaccine is NOT available yet and is not expected until 2004. In the absence of a confirmed case of smallpox anywhere in the world, there is no need to be vaccinated against smallpox. There also can be severe side effects from the smallpox vaccine. In the event of an outbreak, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have clear guidelines to swiftly provide vaccine to people exposed to the disease.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is working with state and local governments to form volunteer Smallpox Response Teams who can provide critical services to the community in the event of a smallpox attack. Pre-attack vaccination of Smallpox Response Teams will allow them, in the event of a smallpox outbreak, to immediately administer the vaccine to others and care for victims.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

- For **2 weeks** after the person breathes the infected air, they will have no symptoms.
- At the **beginning of the third week**, the infected person will begin to feel very sick with a high fever, severe tiredness, headache, backache, stomachache, and vomiting. During the third week, the fever may increase and the person may become confused and disoriented. At the **end of the third week**, the fever will decrease and a rash will appear in the mouth or on the face. The rash will then spread to the neck, arms, legs, and the soles of the feet and palms of the hands. ***The person is most contagious once the rash appears in his or her mouth.***
- During the **fourth week**, the rash will progress from fluid-filled blisters to pus-filled blisters to scabs.
- During the **fifth week**, the scabs will heal and begin to fall off. Smallpox is no longer contagious once all the scabs have fallen off the skin. The scabs are infectious and must be disposed of properly.
- It takes approximately **six weeks** for the disease to run its course from exposure to no longer contagious. The majority of patients with smallpox recover, but death may occur in up to 30% of cases.

How is smallpox spread?

In the majority of cases, smallpox is spread from one person to another by infected saliva droplets from the ill person. People with smallpox are most infectious once the rash appears; however, some risk of transmission lasts until all scabs have fallen off. Contaminated clothing or bed linen could also spread the virus. Special precautions need to be taken to ensure that all bedding and clothing of patients are cleaned appropriately with bleach and hot water. Disinfectants such as bleach and quaternary ammonia can be used for cleaning contaminated surfaces.

If someone is exposed to smallpox, is it too late to get a vaccination?

If the vaccine is given within 4 days after exposure to smallpox, it can lessen the severity of illness or even prevent it.

If people got the vaccination in the past when it was used routinely, will they be immune?

Not necessarily. Routine vaccination against smallpox ended in 1972. The level of immunity, if any, among persons who were vaccinated before 1972 is uncertain; therefore, these persons are assumed to be susceptible. For those who were vaccinated, most estimates suggest immunity from the vaccination lasts 3 to 5 years. Immunity can be boosted effectively with a single revaccination. Prior infection with the disease grants lifelong immunity.

Is it possible for people to get smallpox from the vaccination?

No, smallpox vaccine does not contain smallpox virus but another live virus called vaccinia virus. Since this virus is related to smallpox virus, vaccination with vaccinia provides immunity against infection from smallpox virus.

How safe is the smallpox vaccine?

Smallpox vaccine is considered safe. However, some people with pre-existing conditions such as eczema or immune system disorders have a higher risk for having complications from the vaccine. Adverse reactions have been known to occur, and range from mild rashes to rare brain infections or death. Smallpox vaccine should not be administered to persons with a history or presence of eczema or other skin conditions, pregnant women, or persons with suppressed immune systems such as occurs with HIV/AIDS, leukemia, lymphoma, generalized malignancy, or solid organ transplantation.

Is there any treatment for smallpox?

There is no proven treatment for smallpox, but research to evaluate new antiviral agents is ongoing. Patients with smallpox can benefit from supportive therapy (e.g., intravenous fluids, medicine to control fever or pain) and antibiotics for any secondary bacterial infections that may occur.

Is there a test to indicate if smallpox is in the environment like there is for anthrax?

Various agencies are currently validating tests designed to test for the smallpox virus in the environment.

What should people do if they suspect a patient has smallpox or suspect that smallpox has been released in their area?

Report suspected cases of smallpox or suspected intentional release of smallpox to the State Communications Center in Boise, 1-800-632-8000. They will notify the state health department, the FBI, and local law enforcement. The state health department will notify the CDC.

How can we stop the spread of smallpox after someone comes down with it?

Symptomatic patients with suspected or confirmed smallpox are capable of spreading the virus. Patients should be placed in medical isolation so that they will not continue to spread the virus. In addition, people who have come into close contact with smallpox patients should be vaccinated immediately and closely watched for symptoms of smallpox. Vaccine and isolation are the strategies for stopping the spread of smallpox.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Updated February 2003.
SCHD: 2/06 1502-61 Smallpox Information - English