

## Information on Smallpox (variola major)

Provided by Central District Health Department  
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### What is smallpox?

For hundreds of years, smallpox was a disease that caused serious illness and death around the world. The virus that caused smallpox was called variola major. As a result of international vaccination efforts, the World Health Assembly certified that the world was free from naturally occurring smallpox in 1980. Smallpox infection can cause severe, debilitating disease and approximately 30% of people infected with smallpox may die of the disease.

### What are the symptoms of smallpox?

Typically illness begins 12 to 14 days after infection with a high fever (104°), malaise (headache and body aches) and extreme fatigue. Then a rash usually appears on the lining of the mouth and throat and the face and forearms. The rash spreads to the trunk and legs. Within another two days the rash begins to form round, hard pustules (pox) that are deeply embedded in the skin. Eventually the pustules form scabs that fall off.

### How can smallpox be spread?

Smallpox virus mainly spreads through the air. Tiny drops of moisture carry the virus from the mouth or throat of an infected person when they cough, sneeze or even sing. People in **close contact** with the infected person (such as household members and health care workers) may be infected when they inhale the virus. Contaminated clothing or bed linens can spread the virus too. Smallpox is considered a potential biological weapon because it could be spread through the air.

### How long after being infected would a person become sick?

The known incubation period (the time between infection and onset of symptoms) for smallpox is usually 12 to 14 days, but it can range from 7 to 17 days.

### When could someone with smallpox spread it to others?

An infected person would be most contagious from the time the rash first appears until 7 to 10 days later. Once scabs form, the risk of infecting others would be greatly reduced, but not totally eliminated.

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## **Is there a vaccine for smallpox?**

Routine vaccination for smallpox was discontinued in the U.S. in 1972. There has always been a limited supply of smallpox vaccine available for use by the military, laboratory technicians, researchers and health care specialists working on smallpox. In the last year the United States government has taken steps to increase the production and availability of a smallpox vaccine. As of May 2002 no decision has been made regarding universal smallpox vaccination. Currently, no smallpox vaccine is available at health departments or doctors' offices.

## **How can the spread of smallpox be prevented or controlled?**

Vaccination is one way that the spread of smallpox could be prevented. The vaccine can protect a person if it is received within three days of an exposure. However, there are risks of adverse reactions and side effects associated with receiving the smallpox vaccine, which is why the decision to vaccinate everyone in the absence of an actual smallpox outbreak is a difficult one. Placing diagnosed smallpox cases, their household and close contacts in strict isolation, interviewing and immunizing potentially exposed individuals, and heightened surveillance of emergency room visits and hospital admissions would also be effective in identifying potential smallpox cases.

## **How is smallpox treated?**

Currently there are no specific treatments for smallpox, only supportive measures.

## **What should a person do if they think they might have smallpox? SEE A PHYSICIAN IMMEDIATELY!**

Additional information on smallpox is available from the "Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Program" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website [www.bt.cdc.gov](http://www.bt.cdc.gov).