

Dated: July 12, 2025

Measles in Pregnancy: What You Need to Know (British Columbia)

As of July 7, 2025, there have been 99 confirmed cases of measles reported in British Columbia. Health authorities have identified community transmission, which means the virus can spread quickly through the population. Pregnant people and their babies are especially vulnerable. It is important to understand how measles spreads, recognize its symptoms, and know what steps to take if you are exposed.

What is Measles? How Can You Get a Measles Infection?

Measles is a highly contagious virus that spreads through coughing, sneezing, or simply breathing the same air as someone who is infected. The virus can remain in the air for up to two hours after the infected person has left. About 90% of people who are not immune will become infected if they are exposed.

After exposure, it typically takes 7 to 21 days (on average around 10 days) for symptoms to appear. A person with measles can spread the virus from one day before symptoms start until four days after the rash appears.

What Are the Symptoms of Measles?

Measles usually begins with fever and tiredness, followed by cough, runny nose, and red eyes (conjunctivitis). Two to three days after symptoms begin, white, grey spots known as Koplik spots may appear inside the mouth.

A red, blotchy rash typically appears three to five days after the fever starts. The rash usually begins on the face and then spreads down to the neck, trunk, arms, and legs.

Why is Measles Serious in Pregnancy?

Pregnant people who are not immune are more likely to get infected than those who are not pregnant, and they face a higher risk of death. Most pregnant people with measles will require hospital care.

Measles infection during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, preterm birth, and growth restriction in the womb. If infection happens close to delivery (within 14 days), the baby may be born with congenital measles, which can cause blindness, deafness, brain damage, or even death.

Who Is Considered Immune to Measles?

You are considered immune to measles if you:

- Were born before January 1, 1970;
- Have received the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine(s) during routine immunizations;
- Have a documented past measles infection; or
- Have laboratory evidence of immunity (measles antibody)

If you were born in Canada **and** received the routine immunizations in childhood **and** have immune levels of rubella antibodies (which is routinely screened in pregnancy), you are considered immune to measles.

In British Columbia, routine blood testing to check for measles immunity is not recommended. It should be considered only if someone is unable to confirm their immune status after an exposure.

What Should You Do If You've Been Exposed to Measles?

If you know you have been near someone with measles, the first step is to check if you are immune. Consider:

- Have you had the MMR vaccine, as per the routine immunization schedule?
- Have you had a lab test showing you are immune to measles or rubella?

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- Do you have a documented past infection?
- Were you born in Canada and/or before 1970?

If you are **immune**, you do not need treatment, but you should continue to watch for symptoms for 21 days.

If you are **not immune**, you may qualify for IVIg (immune globulin) treatment, which should be given within six days of exposure. IVIg can help prevent infection or reduce its severity.

What Should You Do If You're Pregnant and Have Symptoms or Exposure?

If you think you might have measles symptoms or know you were exposed, call your prenatal care provider as soon as possible. Before arriving at the clinic or hospital, please notify them in advance so the team can prepare and reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others.

At the clinic or hospital, you may be asked to wear a mask and follow precautions. Testing may include a nose or throat swab, urine sample, and blood tests (antibodies). Test results usually come back within one to three days.

Treatment During Pregnancy

If you have confirmed measles, there is no specific antiviral medication. Treatment is supportive only and focuses on managing fever, maintaining hydration, and monitoring for complications. Many pregnant people with measles will need hospital care for close observation.

After the infection, ongoing monitoring of the pregnancy will be supported by a team of specialized care providers.

Reasons to Return to the Hospital with a Measles Infection

If you do not require hospital admission, you should return to the hospital if you have:

- breathing difficulties,
- severe dehydration (unable to keep fluids down, low/no urination),
- severe drowsiness,
- persistent high fever ($>39.5^{\circ}\text{C}$) despite acetaminophen use,
- decreased baby movements, or
- signs of preterm labour (contractions, fluid leakage, vaginal bleeding).

How Can You Protect Yourself and Your Baby?

- Review your vaccination records to confirm your immunity.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who has symptoms of measles.
- Limit time in crowded places during outbreaks, especially if you are unsure of your immunity.
- Plan to get the MMR vaccine before or after pregnancy (vaccine is safe during breastfeeding)
 - It is not given during pregnancy because it is a live vaccine.

Who to Call for Help or Questions

- HealthLink BC: Call 8-1-1 (available 24/7 for health advice)
- Your prenatal care providers
- Your local public health unit:

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| Vancouver Coastal Health: During business hours: 1-855-675-3900 After business hours: 604-527-4893 | Interior Health: 1-855-549-6364 | Island Health: South Island: 1-866-665-6626 Central Island: 1-866-770-7798 North Island: 1-877-887-8835 |
| Northern Health: 1-844-645-7811 | Fraser Health: 604-507-5484 | |