

Smallpox Fact Sheet

Toledo-Lucas County Health Department | Emergency Preparedness



What is smallpox?

Before smallpox was eradicated, it was a serious infectious disease caused by the variola virus. It was contagious and people who had smallpox had a fever and a distinctive, progressive skin rash. Most people with smallpox recovered, but about 3 out of every 10 people with the disease died. Many smallpox survivors have permanent scars over large areas of their body, especially their faces. Some are left blind. Thanks to the success of vaccination, smallpox was eradicated, and no cases of naturally occurring smallpox have happened since 1977.

How does smallpox spread?

Before smallpox was eradicated, it was mainly spread by direct and fairly prolonged face-to-face contact between people. Smallpox patients become contagious once the first sores appeared in their mouth and throat (early rash stage). They spread the virus when they cough or sneezed and droplets from their nose or mouth spread to other people. They remained contagious until their last smallpox scab fell off.



These scabs and the fluid found in the patient's sores also contained the variola virus. The virus can spread through these materials or through the

objects contaminate by them, such as bedding or clothing. People who cared for smallpox patients and washed their bedding or clothing had to wear gloves and take care to not get infected.

What are the signs and symptoms of smallpox?

A person with smallpox goes through several stages as the disease progresses. Each stage has its own signs and symptoms.

Incubation period. The incubation period is the length of time the virus is in a person's body before they look or feel sick. During this period, a person usually has no symptoms and may feel fine. This stage can last anywhere from 7 to 19 days (although the average length is 10 to 14 days). It is not contagious at this stage.

Initial Symptoms. At this time, people are usually too sick to carry on their normal activities. This stage lasts anywhere from 2 to 4 days. Smallpox may be contagious during this phase, but it is most contagious during the next 2 stages (early rash and pustular rash and scabs).



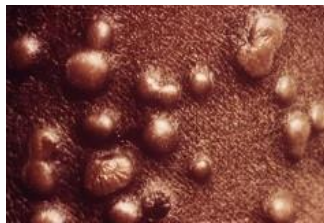
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Early Rash. This stage lasts about 4 days and the person is most contagious at this phase. A rash starts as small red spots on the back of the tongue and in the mouth. These spots change into sores that break open and spread large amounts of the virus into the mouth and throat. The person continues to have a fever.

Once the sores in the mouth start breaking down, a rash appears on the skin, starting on the face and spreading to the arms and legs, and then to the hands and feet. Usually, it spreads to all parts of the body within 24 hours. As the rash appears, the fever begins to decline, and the person may feel better. By the fourth day, the skin sores fill with a thick, opaque fluid and often have a dent in the center. Once the skin sores fill with fluid, the fever may rise again and remain high until scabs form over the bumps.

Pustular Rash and Scabs. This stage lasts about 10 days and the patient is contagious. The sores become pustules (sharply raised, usually round and firm to the touch). After about 5 days, the pustules begin to form a crust and the scab. By the end of the second week after the rash appears, most of the sores have scabbed over.



Scabs Fall Off. This stage lasts about 6 days and the patient is still contagious. The scabs begin to fall off leaving marks on the skin. Three weeks after the rash appears most scabs will have fallen off.

No Scabs. This phase is not contagious. Four weeks after the rash appears all scabs should have fallen off. Once all scabs have fallen off, the person is no longer contagious.

What is the treatment for smallpox?

There is no proven treatment for smallpox disease, but some antiviral drugs may help it or prevent it from getting worse. There also is a vaccine to protect people against smallpox. If there were a smallpox outbreak, health officials would use the smallpox vaccine to control it.

How is smallpox prevented?

Smallpox can be prevented by the smallpox vaccine. If you get the vaccine:

- **Before contact with the virus,** the vaccine can protect you from getting sick.
- **Within 3 days of being exposed to the virus,** the vaccine might protect you from getting the disease. If you still get the disease, you might get much less sick than an unvaccinated person would.
- **Within 4 to 7 days of being exposed to the virus,** the vaccine likely gives you some protection from the disease. If you still get the disease, you might not get as sick as an unvaccinated person would.

For more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
<https://www.cdc.gov/smallpox/index.html>

The Toledo-Lucas County Health Department is committed to providing relevant and timely information during a public health emergency.

For the latest information, please visit:
www.lucascountyhealth.com



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