
Measles: More Than a Rash

By Gigi Reed, MD July 30, 2026

I looked at the news today and saw yet another article about measles. This made me think that perhaps I need to write on it once again.

Most people think of measles as a rash-and-fever illness that children used to get before vaccination became routine. It is far more than that. Measles is one of the most contagious human infections ever identified. It is caused by a virus which spreads through the air and can remain active on surfaces or in a room for up to two hours after an infected person has left. One does not need direct contact — simply breathing the same air can be enough. A person with measles is contagious from about four days before the rash appears to four days after, meaning they can spread the disease before they even know they have it.

In the United States, measles is fatal in about 2 out of 1,000 infected children. Complications include pneumonia and encephalitis, and even those who recover can suffer lasting consequences. The youngest children, people with weakened immune systems, and the malnourished are at greatest risk.

Measles during pregnancy is especially dangerous. Pregnant women who contract measles have roughly a tenfold higher risk of death compared with non-pregnant individuals. The infection is linked to miscarriage, premature birth, stillbirth, and low birth weight. Because the MMR vaccine contains a live — though weakened — virus, it is not given during pregnancy. The strategy is to confirm immunity before pregnancy or vaccinate after delivery.

There is no specific antiviral cure for measles. Treatment is supportive: rest, fluids, fever control, and close monitoring for complications.

The MMR vaccine is the standard prevention, and it is remarkably effective: about 93% after one dose and 97% after two. Serious allergic reactions occur in roughly 1 in 1 million doses. The vaccine uses what is called a live attenuated virus — the real measles strain, but weakened through successive cell cultures so it trains the immune system without causing disease. Think of it as a safe practice run for the immune system. MMR is combined into one shot to protect against measles, mumps, and rubella, reducing injections while providing the same protection. The rubella component has an added benefit: it helps prevent infections that can seriously harm babies in the womb.

So why does measles keep appearing in the news? Because it does not need a majority of susceptible people to spread — it only needs pockets. Outbreaks reappear when vaccination rates dip, fueled by misinformation, missed routine care, or the mistaken belief that measles is no longer a threat. The disease is newsworthy precisely because it is both preventable and still capable of causing severe harm when vigilance lapses.

The bottom line is simple. Measles is serious, highly contagious, and potentially deadly — especially for young children and pregnant women. There is no cure once infection takes hold. But the vaccine is one of the most effective and safest in modern medicine. The choice to vaccinate is not just personal; it is what keeps the most vulnerable among us safe

(Gigireedmd@gmail.com)