

Smallpox Questions & Answers

What is smallpox?

Smallpox is an acute, contagious rash illness caused by the *variola* virus. Patients have fever and a distinctive, progressive skin rash. In its most severe form, up to three out of ten people sickened with smallpox will die.

How common is smallpox?

In 1980, smallpox was declared globally eradicated following worldwide vaccination programs. However, in the aftermath of the events of September and October 2001, the United States government is taking precautions to be ready to deal with a bioterror attack that uses smallpox as a weapon.

Why are we so concerned with smallpox now?

Since world events are moving rapidly, there is great concern that terror events could increase. One possibility, however unlikely, is the deliberate release of smallpox as a biologic weapon.

What is the County being asked to do with regard to smallpox preparedness?

Under the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with the New York State Department of Health, Westchester County is being asked to move swiftly to develop a plan to provide smallpox vaccine both in anticipation of, and in the event of, a smallpox outbreak.

What would the plan look like?

Nationwide smallpox vaccination plans are currently being developed and discussions are focusing on:

- **Pre-event:** a vaccination plan to inoculate people in stages, before there is a smallpox case; The first stage will include healthcare workers.
- **Post-event:** a response plan to vaccinate people quickly, and to contain a smallpox outbreak in the event of a smallpox case.

What is the pre-event plan?

The pre-event plan would gradually provide immunity to smallpox through vaccination before there is a case of smallpox, beginning with healthcare workers and public health teams that would investigate and care for the first suspected or confirmed smallpox case. Under the pre-event plan, counties are also upgrading their emergency response plans to prepare for a possible public health emergency.

What is the post-event plan?

The post-event plan focuses on isolation of the person(s) with smallpox and vaccination of targeted populations.

How many people would have to get smallpox before it is considered an outbreak?

One suspected case of smallpox is considered a public health emergency.

What are the symptoms of smallpox?

After exposure, it may take between 7 and 17 days (average 12 to 14) for symptoms of smallpox to appear. During this time, the infected person feels fine and is not contagious. The symptoms of smallpox begin with high fever, head and body aches, and sometimes vomiting. A rash follows that spreads and progresses to raised bumps that crust, scab, and fall off after about three weeks, leaving a pitted scar.

Is smallpox contagious before the smallpox symptoms show?

A person with smallpox becomes infectious, or contagious, once a rash appears, and is usually very sick and not able to move around in the community. After the appearance of a rash, the infected person is contagious until the last smallpox scab falls off.

How is smallpox spread?

Generally, direct and somewhat lengthy face-to-face contact is required to spread smallpox from one person to another. Smallpox also can be spread through direct contact with infected bodily fluids or infected objects such as bedding or clothing. Rarely, smallpox has been spread by virus carried in the air in enclosed settings such as buildings, buses, and trains. Smallpox is not known to be transmitted by insects, animals, food or water.

If smallpox is released into the air, how long does the virus survive?

The smallpox virus is fragile and in the event of an airborne release of smallpox, 90 percent of viruses will be inactivated or dissipated in about 24 hours.

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, and medicine to control fever or pain) and antibiotics for any secondary bacterial infections that may occur. Smallpox can be prevented through the smallpox vaccine.

**For additional information, call the Westchester County Department of Health at
(914) 813-5000 or visit the following websites:**

www.westchestergov.com/health

www.health.state.ny.us

www.cdc.gov