Dear Alice,

A friend of mine is living with someone who might have just got measles (results pending). If true, and my friend has also got it, how contagious is it? I think it is measles, rather than German measles, which I had as a child. Does past illness provide any defense? That is, can you get it twice? I presume having had German measles does not provide any protection against measles.

How is it transmitted? Like a cold? (Physical contact, common contact with hard surfaces, and maybe airborne?)

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although your concern about measles is understandable, first, take a deep breath. So far, no one has actually been diagnosed. The most likely way to get measles is from an infected person. If your friend and her/his roommate do not have measles, you're off the hook. You ask whether having had German measles (rubella) provides a person with immunity to measles (rubeola)? unfortunately, that's not the case. At this time though, it would be good to check into your immunity status and determine whether you would benefit from being vaccinated (more on that in a bit). In the case that your friend and their roommate have the measles, here's the scoop:

- Measles is caused by a virus (German measles is a different viral infection).
- High fever, rash, runny nose, watery eyes, and coughing are some of the symptoms of measles.
- People can get measles at any age, but those who are younger than 5 or over 20 years of age are more likely to experience complications due to the infection.

Measles is spread readily from person-to-person, and transmitted through airborne droplets that people who are infected spread when they sneeze, cough, or talk. Infected droplets that are in the air or that land on surfaces can remain active for about two hours. Because of this, measles is highly contagious and occasionally it can be quite serious. Even if your friend's roommate does have measles, if you grew up or attended school in the United States, it's likely that you've been vaccinated against the illness (with the mumps-measles-rubella MMR vaccine). The vaccine is quite effective - one dose being about 93 percent effective and two doses being about 97 percent effective. Being vaccinated doesn't guarantee that you'll
have immunity; however, it's a great dose of prevention to have working in your favor. If you're fully vaccinated and do get the measles, your case will likely be mild and not as contagious as those who aren't vaccinated.

Fortunately, with the advent of an effective vaccine, the number of cases in the United States has dropped dramatically. Most people who come down with measles will develop lifelong immunity. The same is true of German measles. If you're not sure if you have been vaccinated or had either type of measles in the past, you can consult your vaccination records or your health care provider can administer a blood test to determine whether you already have immunity [5] (though this can take a few visits to determine). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [6] note that there's no harm in getting another dose of the MMR vaccine if you're already immune, so that is also an option.

For now, you may consider maintaining healthy habits like eating a balanced diet, getting plenty of rest, exercising moderately, and washing your hands; all of these actions help support a healthy immune system. If your friend or her/his roommate is diagnosed with measles, keep an eye out for the symptoms listed above. Anytime you feel sick, especially when your symptoms include a high fever or rash, it's a good idea to visit a health care provider. Here's hoping that the roommate in question just has a cold, and that you'll avoid any illness at all.

Take care,

Alice!

Related questions

MMR versus TB [9]
Mumps and swelling of the testes - Affect fertility? [10]
TB hee-bee-gee-bees: Tuberculosis causes and concerns [12]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [13]
Medical Services (CUMC) [14]
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