



**Disaster and Terrorism Response:
Emergency Preparedness Tools for Pharmacists and
Health-System Pharmacy Departments
FACT SHEET**

SMALLPOX

BACKGROUND: Smallpox is a contagious and sometimes fatal infectious disease caused by the variola virus.

TRANSMISSION: Smallpox is spread person-to-person through direct contact with respiratory droplets, aerosols, secretions, and skin lesions from an infected person. Direct and fairly prolonged face-to-face contact (less than six feet for more than three hours) generally is required to spread smallpox from person-to-person. Although less common, smallpox can be transmitted through contact with contaminated clothing or bedding. Smallpox cannot be spread by animals or insects. People are contagious when the rash, which often begins in the mouth and throat, first appears. A person remains contagious until the rash heals and the last smallpox scab falls off.

CLINICAL EFFECTS: After a person is exposed to the virus, symptoms usually begin within 12 to 14 days, but can begin anytime between seven and 17 days. The first symptoms include fever, malaise, headache, backache, sometimes vomiting, and occasionally mental confusion. At this time, people are usually too ill to carry on their normal activities.

Two to four days after the first symptoms develop, a rash emerges, the fever usually falls and the person may feel better. The rash begins in the mouth, spreads to the face, to the arms and legs (including hands and feet), and to the rest of the body within 24 hours. Initially, the rash is manifest as raised bumps, filled with a viscous fluid, often with a depression in the center that resembles a belly-button. Within five to 10 days, the bumps become sharply raised, round, and firm pustules. Within two weeks the pustules form a crust and become scabs. During the third week of the rash, the scabs fall off, leaving behind pitted scars.

TREATMENT: Treatment consists of supportive care and relief of symptoms. No proven effective treatment exists to date, although there are some experimental antiviral medications that are being investigated. Smallpox vaccinations would be reinstated if an outbreak of smallpox were to occur. Vaccina immune globulin can be used to treat certain severe vaccination reactions.

For 24/7 assistance in the emergency management of an actual or suspected chemical terrorism exposure, contact a Certified Regional Poison Information Center at 1-800-222-1222.

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