



Smallpox

Preparedness

Though a bioterrorist attack using smallpox is not likely to happen, public health authorities plan and prepare so that we can protect as many people as possible if this event does occur.

What You Can Do to Prepare

A bioterrorist attack isn't the same as other emergencies that you might prepare for, like a hurricane or tornado, but there are things you can do now to make sure you have the knowledge and tools to protect yourself and your family.

Know How You Would Stay Informed

An outbreak of smallpox would be a frightening thing, but if it happens, CDC will communicate with you through television, radio, the internet, and other channels. You will be able to get information on [CDC's website](#) or social media pages, like Twitter and Facebook. CDC will coordinate with state and local public health departments, law enforcement, and other federal agencies to let you know the things you can do to protect yourself and your family. You can also talk to your primary health care provider, such as your doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant.

In an emergency, seek out information early and often. No one will have all the answers on Day 1, but as public health authorities learn more information, they will communicate it to you.

Know How You Would Get the Vaccine During a Smallpox Emergency

If you spend a lot of time with someone who is sick with smallpox, your local public health department will give you information about how, where, and when to get the vaccine that will help protect you from getting the disease. You will not have to pay for this vaccine.

In a smallpox emergency, if you choose not to get the vaccine and you have had close contact with someone who has smallpox, you will need to stay at home and away from other people for up to 18 days. This way you can be sure that if you get the disease you don't spread it to anyone else. You will also need to take your temperature twice a day and give the results to your local health department, so they can help you get care immediately if you show symptoms of smallpox.

Know Your Medical History

If a smallpox emergency happens, public health authorities will start to give people the smallpox vaccine. The vaccine is generally safe and effective, but it may cause some [side effects](#). Some people may be more likely to experience side effects than others. The person giving you the vaccine will want to know certain things about your health and any medical problems you may have or have had in the past. You can help by keeping a written medical history for yourself and your family members.

If there is a smallpox emergency, before you get the smallpox vaccine, tell the person giving the vaccine about the following:

- Any medical conditions you have now or had in the past – especially any that lower your body's ability to fight infections. These medical conditions could include HIV, cancer, or if you have had an organ transplant.
- Any medications you take – especially any that lower your body's ability to fight infections, such as high-dose steroids or steroid eye drops.
- If you have any skin conditions, such as eczema or atopic dermatitis – or if you had them in the past.
- If you have, or have ever had, heart problems.
- If you or anyone you live with is pregnant or may become pregnant.
- If anyone you live with is less than 1 year old.
- If you are currently breastfeeding.
- If you have ever had a bad reaction to the smallpox vaccine in the past.

If you are not sure if you have these conditions, or if you have questions about whether you should get the smallpox vaccine if it is offered to you, talk with your healthcare provider.

Currently, the smallpox vaccine is available only to people who research smallpox in a laboratory and to certain members of the military. It is available to the general public only if there is a confirmed outbreak of smallpox.

What CDC Does to Prepare

CDC prepares for a smallpox outbreak so that if it happens public health authorities can respond quickly to slow down and stop the spread of disease. There are many ways CDC and others prepare.

- **Research new treatments, vaccines, and lab tests** – CDC works with scientists to find ways to treat smallpox in the modern era. Before smallpox was wiped out, there were no medications that could treat or cure it. People sick with smallpox were usually treated at home and many of them died. Thanks to research on the virus that causes smallpox, scientists have found new drugs that might help people who are sick with smallpox get less sick or recover faster. Scientists are also [working](#) to find a better vaccine for smallpox, and to develop laboratory tests that diagnose the disease faster and easier.
- **Store drugs and vaccines** – CDC keeps a stockpile of drugs and vaccines to help during emergencies. In the [Strategic National Stockpile](#) there are enough doses of smallpox vaccine to give every person in the United States a vaccine, if they want it, in a smallpox emergency. This stockpile also has drugs that might help treat people who get sick with smallpox.
- **Work with other groups to plan an effective response** – CDC, other federal partners, state and local health departments, and medical organizations work together to plan how to respond in an emergency. They practice responding and learn from other public health and emergency responses. Each time CDC and its partners respond to an outbreak of disease or other public health emergency, public health authorities learn how to respond better.
- **Educate professionals and the public** – Smallpox is not a familiar disease. Without ongoing education and training, it might be easy to overlook the signs and symptoms in a sick person. CDC continues to educate the public and provide training to medical providers, public health professionals, and laboratory workers. The goal of education and training is to give people the knowledge and tools they need to recognize and respond to the disease, if an emergency ever happens.

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Content source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases \(NCEZID\), Division of High-Consequence Pathogens and Pathology \(DHCPP\)](#)