

Smallpox Fact Sheet

I. Etiology

Smallpox is an acute viral illness caused by the variola virus.

Smallpox is a bioterrorism threat and a single case is a public health emergency.

II. Clinical Features

Acute clinical symptoms resemble other acute viral illnesses, such as influenza. Skin lesions appear, quickly progressing from macules to papules to vesicles. Other clinical symptoms to aid in identification include:

- 2-4 day, non-specific prodrome of fever, myalgias.
- Rash most prominent on face and extremities (including palms and soles) in contrast to the truncal distribution of varicella (chicken pox).
- Rash scabs over in 1-2 weeks.
- In contrast to the rash of varicella, which arises in “crops,” variola rash erupts all at once.

III. Mode of transmission

Smallpox is transmitted via both large and small respiratory droplets. **Person-to-person transmission is likely from airborne and droplet exposure, and by contact with skin lesions or secretions.** Patients are considered more infectious when coughing or when they have a hemorrhagic form of smallpox.

IV. Incubation period

- 7-17 days; average 12 days.

Period of communicability

- Patients become infectious at the onset of the rash and remain infectious until their scabs separate (approximately 3 weeks).
- Even previously vaccinated persons are considered susceptible to smallpox.

V. **See Mass Casualty Bioterrorism Plan for Smallpox, Section 2.18.**