What is smallpox?

Smallpox is a contagious and infectious disease caused by the variola virus. Smallpox can be deadly; resulting in death for about 3 out of 10 unvaccinated individuals. Survivors are often left with scars on their bodies and their eyes, resulting in blindness.

How does the smallpox virus spread and what are the symptoms?

The virus is usually spread by prolonged face-to-face contact with an infected person, by direct contact with infected body fluids or contaminated objects like clothing, towels, or bedding. Symptoms of smallpox begin with a high fever, head and body aches, and fatigue. A pustular rash typically develops 12 to 14 days after exposure lasting for about 3 weeks. A person infected with the smallpox virus is contagious from the time fever starts, but is most highly contagious when a rash begins. The infected person can spread the disease until the last scab falls off. There is no specific treatment to cure a smallpox infection, and the only way to prevent the disease is through vaccination.

Why is the Department of Defense vaccinating personnel?

Due to vaccination of the masses, smallpox was declared eradicated in 1980, and routine smallpox vaccination stopped. Although no cases of smallpox have been reported since the eradication, the potential exists for the virus to be used as a biological weapon by enemies of the U.S. The DoD began the event smallpox vaccination program in 2002 to protect personnel traveling to high threat areas.

Who is required to receive the vaccine?

Smallpox vaccination is mandatory for uniformed personnel deployed or assigned to the Korean Peninsula for 15 or more consecutive days. Vaccinations are also mandatory for some emergency-essential personnel and contractors, certain uniformed personnel assigned to special units, and comparable U.S. government civilian employees.

For more details on the specific criteria for each of these groups, please see applicable DoD and Service policies.
To verify proper vaccination, it is important for a healthcare provider to evaluate your vaccination site 6 to 8 days after receiving the vaccine. People vaccinated for the first time may have a larger reaction than those who have been vaccinated. Your site may not look exactly like the picture, because everyone responds differently to the vaccine. However, if your vaccination site does NOT look similar to one of the pictures above, on Day 4, Day 7, or Day 14, see your healthcare provider; vaccination site does NOT look similar to one of the pictures above, on Day 7 after vaccination and until the site is healed.

Smallpox Vaccination Site

Day 4
Day 7
Day 14

Who should not get smallpox vaccine? (continued from previous page)
» Use eye drops or ointment
» Who are breastfeeding
Who have had problems after previous doses or are allergic to the vaccine or any of its component
Who should expect the vaccination site to look like after receiving the vaccine?

Most individuals experience mild reactions that usually peak 3 to 12 days after vaccinations and rarely last more than 30 days. The most common reactions include:
»itching at and around the vaccination site
»Swollen and/or tender lymph nodes in the arm and neck
»Arm may become sore and red around vaccination site
»Headache, and body ache
»Fatigue

On rare occasions individuals may experience more serious side effects that require immediate medical attention. If you experience any of the below symptoms it is important that you seek immediate medical care at the nearest medical facility.
» Rash or sores elsewhere on the body days to weeks after vaccination
» Allergic reaction (hives, wheezing, or hightened) after vaccination
» A severe skin rash in people with eczema or atopic dermatitis
» Ongoing infection with skin tissue destruction or site is unable to heal
» Fatality, which may occur in the skin or under the skin

Signs of an allergic reaction include:
» chest pain
» rapid heartbeat
» exercise intolerance
» shortness of breath
» confusion
» paralysis
» numbness
» change in vision
» weakness of arm
» weakness of leg
» persistent pain
» fever
» rash

Symptoms of an ongoing infection include:
» ongoing pain, redness, and swelling
» fever
» chills
» malaise

If you experience any of these symptoms it is important that you seek immediate medical care at the nearest medical facility.

To reduce complications and spreading of the disease elsewhere on your body:
» Do NOT let others touch your vaccination site or materials that may have touched your vaccination site.
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» Keep site completely covered with a dry non-stick bandage (i.e., Band-Aid®, telfa™ pad); DO NOT use gauze or cloth bandage.
» Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or a alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Smallpox vaccination is a virus that is not spread through kissing or sex, and is not airborne. Although rare, transfer of the vaccine virus to a spouse and intimate partner has occurred. You can be intimate with your partner; however, be sure to follow all precautions as stated above such as wearing a bandage and long sleeves, if the vaccination site is not properly covered, you may spread the virus to your partner. Be sure to thoroughly wash your hands before and after sexual contact.

What if I become pregnant within 4 weeks of my vaccination?
Women should avoid getting pregnant for 4 weeks after receiving the smallpox vaccine.
A very rare complication of vaccination during pregnancy is called fetal vaccinia. There have been only three cases in the 20th century and no reported cases since the U.S. started the smallpox program in 2002. If you received the smallpox vaccine within 42 days from conception it is recommended you enroll in the National Smallpox Vaccine in Pregnancy Registry by calling 619.553.9255 or email at NHRC-VaccineRegistry@med.navy.mil. Getting pregnant while immunized is safe and the only prevention is vaccination.

Can the vaccine virus be sexually transmitted?
No, the virus is not passed through kissing or sex, and is not airborne. Although rare, transfer of the vaccine virus to a spouse and intimate partner has occurred. You can be intimate with your partner; however, be sure to follow all precautions as stated above such as wearing a bandage and long sleeves, if the vaccination site is not properly covered, you may spread the virus to your partner. Be sure to thoroughly wash your hands before and after sexual contact.

Remember the three “W’s”:
1. Do NOT let others touch your vaccination site or materials that may have touched your vaccination site.
2. Keep site completely covered with a dry non-stick bandage (i.e., Band-Aid®, telfa™ pad); DO NOT use gauze or cloth bandage.
3. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or a alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

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Make sure you cover the site with a bandage and wear long sleeves to prevent scratching, especially in bed. Change your bandages frequently so surface remains dry. If you exercise enough to cause sweat to drip, use a waterproof or reinforced bandage. If you exercise enough to cause sweat to drip, use a waterproof or reinforced bandage. When not around others, you can leave the site uncovered; however, be sure to follow all precautions as stated above such as wearing a bandage and long sleeves; if the vaccination site is not properly covered, you may spread the virus to your partner. Be sure to thoroughly wash your hands before and after sexual contact.

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There is no specific treatment for smallpox disease, and the only prevention is vaccination.