Return of the mumps? [1]

Dear Alice,

If you have had the mumps can you get them again?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Mumps [2] is a viral infection that mostly occurs in children aged 5 to 14 years, and causes swelling of the salivary glands at the top of the jaw, near the ears. To quickly answer your question, people who have already had mumps are unlikely to get mumps again since having it once usually results in lifelong immunity. The small percentage of those who do become reinfected are likely to experience milder illness. Additionally, it’s good to note that if a person had suspected that they had mumps but it was never diagnosed by a health care provider, they are not considered immune. In that case, getting the vaccine is still recommended. Because the risk is low for people who’ve previously had mumps to become infected again (or for those who have been previously vaccinated to become infected), it’s worth considering what else might be going on to cause the concern.

For someone who’s experiencing pain or swelling in their salivary glands and has already had mumps before, it is possible that it could be caused by a viral or bacterial infection. More specifically, bacterial infections may be a result of poor oral hygiene, smoking, chronic illness, and blockage of the salivary ducts. Additional symptoms of a salivary gland infection may include a foul taste in the mouth, dry mouth, difficulty opening the mouth, and fever. Some infections that affect the salivary glands resolve on their own and some with treatment. As far as options for self-care are concerned, keeping up with oral health (i.e., brushing, rinsing, flossing, and not smoking), drinking water to increase flow of saliva, and using a warm compress might help.

Your question also brings up another good point — what about the risk a person might run if they are subject to a local outbreak of mumps? It’s a rare disease in the United States. Since kids are routinely vaccinated against measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR), there are now fewer than 1,000 cases of mumps in a typical year. Though the rates are low, in recent years, there have been several outbreaks which have resulted in a higher than usual number of cases. For those living in an area with an increased number of mumps cases, it’s wise for folks to make sure
they’re up-to-date on their MMR vaccine. On that note, frequent hand-washing[3] — though just a simple action — may be a critical tool for preventing mumps transmission, too. For those who believe they’ve been in contact with someone infected with mumps, being seen by a health care provider is recommended.

All this to say, for anyone experiencing symptoms like the ones associated with mumps, it’s wise to get it checked out by a professional. Seeking immediate medical attention is particularly recommended and may be a vital next step for a high fever or difficulty swallowing or breathing.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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