

Health officials concerned by increase in measles cases in state, potential for outbreak

Parents urged to make sure children are up to date on immunizations

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The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) is working with local public health agencies and health care providers in the Twin Cities area to investigate 13 cases of measles that occurred June through September among several different families with unvaccinated children. Most of these children had a history of travel to a country where measles is common and circulating. The most recent case did not have a reported travel history, but investigators are still working to determine how transmission may have occurred.

All cases are in the Twin Cities area. The children have been as young as two years old to children in their early teens, and just over a third are pre-teen. Seven children were hospitalized for treatment of measles.

Minnesota's 13 cases are several times greater than the number of cases the state sees in a typical year. The higher number of cases prompted health officials to alert health care providers to watch for signs of measles in their patients, especially those with recent travel to areas where the virus is circulating.

The possibility that the most recent case could indicate that measles is spreading in the community prompted health officials today to urge parents to make sure their children are up to date on their childhood immunizations, which include the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine.

"The measles virus is highly contagious and very successful at finding people who are unvaccinated, even within groups of people who may be vaccinated," said Dr. Ruth Lynfield, State Epidemiologist. "Measles can be a very serious disease, causing hospitalizations and sometimes death. That's why it's so important to maintain high vaccination rates for measles."

The MMR vaccine is safe and highly effective against measles, according to Jennifer Heath, immunizations program coordinator for MDH. Because the virus itself is so contagious, Heath said, an overall vaccination rate of at least 90% in our communities is needed to keep the virus from causing large outbreaks. Minnesota saw a 3% drop in school-age immunizations during the pandemic due largely to people not getting in for routine well-child-care visits.

"Even a small drop in the immunization coverage rate means there are thousands more children who could be vulnerable to disease because they are not vaccinated," Heath said. "If the coverage rate in a setting like a childcare or school is significantly less than 85 or 90 percent, that's an outbreak waiting to happen," she added.