

## **Back-to-school vaccinations encouraged as Minnesota's immunization rate declines**

When a child starts a new school year, they're exposed to a lot of new people and a lot of new germs.

That's one reason why Andrea Singh, a pediatrician at Health Partners Park Nicollet, said it's important for kids to be up to date with their immunizations. But according to data from the Minnesota Department of Health, about one in three 6-year-olds are not up to date on their vaccinations, like measles, polio and chickenpox.

"As a health care clinician, it's a scary time," Singh said. "As we see these immunizations declining, we are fortunate that we live in a generation where we haven't seen some of these scary illnesses take over. Childhood illnesses take over communities, even COVID. We were lucky because it didn't hit kids disproportionately."

But with vaccinations declining and distrust of the medical community increasing, Singh thinks there could be a resurgence in illnesses like polio and measles.

Those vaccination rates have steadily declined since 2019 in Minnesota and across the nation. Singh said that is partially because of the COVID-19 pandemic restricting access to routine visits, but also because of growing mistrust of the medical community and misinformation about vaccines.

She said she often has to walk parents through what certain vaccines are for, what they do, and what diseases the vaccine protects their children from.

"Why do people get scared about stuff like that? Because they're scared for their kids," Singh said. "They don't want to do anything that might potentially harm their kids."

Only 89 percent of kids in Minnesota are fully vaccinated against measles, mumps and rubella, also known as the MMR vaccine series, which is one of the lowest rates in the country. Health experts say communities need at least a 95 percent vaccination rate to keep measles at bay.

In past measles outbreaks, it was found that misinformation that falsely linked the MMR vaccine to autism encouraged parents in the Somali community to decline the vaccine for their children at higher rates.

Singh said she approaches pediatrics with an understanding that all parents want what's best for their kids, and that this kind of information often stokes doubt and fear for parents who might not have access to resources and information about vaccination.

"So I talk through all of that with parents and help them figure out what their fears are," Singh said. "And that's the way that I am able to help get them to understand the importance of the vaccines and sometimes you can't. Sometimes it's just about creating a plan to say, when will you feel comfortable doing this? It has to be mutual decision making, because in the end these the parents just want to do the right thing for their kids."

In Minneapolis, nearly 40 percent of kids are not up to date on their required vaccines. The city's health department is encouraging families to get their children vaccinated by sharing real-world issues that can happen when a child is not vaccinated in a new social media campaign.

Senior public health specialist Tiana Cervantes said immunizations don't only protect children and their community from dangerous diseases, but can also protect the family's lifestyle.

"For example, the measles: a child might have to quarantine for up to 21 days," Cervantes said. "That means they won't be able to go to school, they won't be able to hang out with their friends. Parents [and] guardians will have to stay home and take care of their children. I mean, that also has a monetary effect."

The Minneapolis Health Department also hosts free vaccine clinics in areas with low vaccination rates.