

MMR VACCINES

Measles is a serious disease, and these outbreaks are cause for concern

BY EDWIN J. ASTURIAS AND SEAN O'LEARY

GUEST COMMENTARY

As winter gives way to spring, an infectious threat for our children looms. From rural west Texas, a measles outbreak is growing steadily, fueled by years of declining vaccination rates in children.

Measles is not new; for centuries, parents and doctors lived with recurrent epidemics. Prior to widespread vaccination, millions of children died every year across the world. The introduction of a safe, effective measles vaccine in the 1960s was a significant milestone in public health, greatly limiting outbreaks of measles, saving millions of lives worldwide, including the couple hundred deaths that occurred yearly in the United States.

Vaccines often are called victims of their own success. Because the MMR vaccine works so well, most Americans don't know how dangerous measles can be. Many young doctors and nurses have never even seen a case.

This lack of urgency about such a serious disease is why Colorado has one of the lowest rates of up-to-date MMR vaccinations. For the 2023-24 school year, only 88.3% of Colorado's kindergarteners were up to date on their MMR shots, far below the 95% needed for community protection, also known as community immunity.

The last major measles outbreak in the United States occurred from 1989 to 1991, resulting in more than 50,000 cases. At that time, one in every five infected children was hospitalized, and 166 tragically lost their lives.

With that epidemic, we learned that a single dose of the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine left one in every 20 children without protection, and creating a vulnerable population that allowed the highly infectious measles virus to resurge.

Measles is extremely contagious; in a community without immunity, each case can infect 10 to 18 contacts, making it far more efficient at spreading than influenza and COVID-19. Thanks to the willingness of almost all parents to protect their children against these serious illnesses and complications, our country successfully eliminated measles 25 years ago.

As anticipated, the surging measles epidemic in Texas has spread well beyond where it started, and, while unconnected to the outbreak, there have been three cases of measles identified in Colorado. Last week an infant with measles spent several hours at Denver Health.

Community protection against measles in the U.S. is at its lowest since we declared it eliminated in 2000. This drop is the result of several factors: Some parents refuse to vaccinate because of false information or debunked myths, and many children still face barriers to accessing care. It's estimated that at least 2 million of the 70 million children under 18 in the U.S. are at risk for measles.

Yet, at the same time this outbreak is occurring close to home, in Washington, D.C., the National Institutes of Health announced that it will cancel or scale back dozens of grants for research into vaccine reluctance.

The NIH is our country's primary medical research agency, and understanding the reasons why many parents have become skeptics about vaccines is key to countering the waves of disinformation that leave many children at the mercy of serious infections that we have conquered decades ago. This research also helps medical professionals establish more effective communication and education methods, build strong relationships with patients, create public trust, and instill confidence in vaccines by sharing the facts. Freedom can be preserved only when knowledge reaches everyone.

Across Colorado, doctors and nurses are getting flooded with calls from worried parents and providers who want to protect their families before measles arrives. The solution is simple: If your child is turning 1, they need their first MMR vaccine. The second dose is recommended between ages 4 and 6 but can be given as early as a month after the first dose for extra protection.

Older children who aren't fully vaccinated should get their two doses as soon as possible.

Pediatricians, family doctors and public health clinics are ready to help our children catch up. No vitamins, cod-liver oil or other untested medicines can stop or treat measles. The only way to prevent measles and its consequences is through vaccination. The MMR vaccine is very powerful, safe, well-tested, and nearly 100% effective. To protect our children and avoid a serious outbreak in Colorado, we must work together to catch up on vaccinations and unite around more, not less, research on vaccines that brings trust and freedom to parents to safeguard their children as the future of our nation.

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