

RETURN OF MEASLES

In the year 2000, measles was said to be officially eliminated from the United States. This meant that though there were 85 cases in the USA that year, all the cases were contracted out of the country and there was no meaningful spread. Contrast this to almost 500,00 cases in 1963, the year when the measles vaccine became available. Last year, 2024, there were 285 cases. This year there have already been 884 cases, including 3 deaths, and it is only May. 40% of last year's cases resulted in hospitalization, of which 52% were children under the age of 5.

Most Americans are too young to remember how severe and highly infectious measles can be. Prior to the vaccine, there were about 48,000 hospitalizations each year due to measles and it resulted in approximately 400 to 500 deaths yearly. Symptoms include a high fever that may spike to over 104F, a rash that begins at the face and then spreads to the rest of the body, a cough, runny nose, conjunctivitis, and in some cases, diarrhea and ear infections. The virus is airborne and spreads easily. However, symptoms do not show up until one or two weeks later. It causes pneumonia in 5% of infected children. One child in 1000 will develop encephalitis. Complications of pneumonia or encephalitis may include death, deafness, or intellectual disability. Death occurs in about 1 to 3 children per 1000 who get infected. Contracting measles during pregnancy may result in a premature birth or low weight baby. In some cases, a measles infection can cause SSPE (subacute sclerosing panencephalitis) about 7 to 10 years later, especially in those who were infected before age 2.

A population is considered to have herd immunity for most diseases when 95% of the population has been vaccinated. Herd immunity protects those who are unable to get the vaccine for medical reasons and those few who do not respond to the vaccine. Vaccination coverage of kindergarten students in 2019-2020 was 95.2%. In 2023-2024 the rate fell to 92.7%, below the herd immunity rate. As noted earlier, measles cases and the number of outbreaks have risen in the last few years. Vaccination is important to protect both those who are vaccinated and the population as a whole.

Children who have received two doses of the vaccine are considered immune to measles for life. The vaccine is included in the comprehensive MMR injection that also protects against mumps and rubella (german measles.) Most adults born before 1957 are considered immune, as they have probably been exposed to measles. If you have had measles you are immune to it. Between 1963 and 1967 there were two formulations of the vaccine; one with live virus and one with killed virus. Those who received the killed virus formulation may need a booster. If you are unaware of which version you were given you can get a booster, or get tested first to see if you are immune.

Unfortunately, there has been much misinformation about the MMR vaccine. Recent studies have disproved the theory that the vaccine causes autism. In areas of the country where there are large numbers of people that refuse the vaccine, measles may become endemic, meaning that it will have a regular presence in that population. Recently there have been eleven outbreaks of this type in the United States. If you have any concerns, speak with your physician. The vaccine is available from your physician, in some pharmacies and in many public health facilities.