



COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



Measles Outbreak Hits Close to Home

Failure to immunize your child is a form of child abuse. It also shows irresponsibility as a member of a community. The current fourteen-state outbreak of measles is a serious concern, particularly for tiny babies. Measles is a highly contagious, acute viral illness with potentially severe health complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis and brain damage, even death. The MMR vaccine, given according to schedule, offers multiple protections—against measles, mumps, and rubella (German measles). The recommended two doses are 97 percent effective.

Measles was declared eliminated in the U.S. in 2000 because a high rate of public immunity had been achieved by this exceedingly effective, and safe, two-dose regimen. Outbreaks only occur in the U.S. when unvaccinated people are exposed to “imported” measles. Unfortunately the virus is still widespread in many parts of the world and visitors can bring it here.

The current outbreak—the second largest in at least 15 years—began in California and the first confirmed cases were patients who reported visiting Disneyland in southern California. But it's not present just on the West Coast: Cases have been reported in nearby Dutchess County (*see related story, page 1*). The disease is passed from a sick person through sneezing and coughing, but can also survive on surfaces for as long as two hours.

Symptoms include fever, cough, runny nose and red eyes. Within a few days a rash appears on the face and spreads downward. Sick individuals are contagious four days before the rash even appears, and then four days afterwards. Because it is so contagious in enclosed areas such as doctors' waiting rooms, there have been a number of cases reported in California of physicians dropping patients who refuse immunizations without a sound medical reason, in order to protect other patients. The ethical responsibilities of physicians in such cases are currently the subject of hot debate by doctors and patients alike.

Getting the measles vaccine is important for you and your whole community. Babies before six months can't have the vaccine, so their safety is dependent on high levels of immunization in their communities. There can be no reasonable debate about the safety of the measles vaccine. The science is clear.

Cases have occurred before in Putnam County, so this is an important reminder. If you are unsure about your vaccination status, check with your doctor to determine your immunity and receive the shots if necessary.

Adults who have no evidence of immunity should get at least one dose of MMR vaccine. Children should get two—one between 12 and 15 months, and a second between 4 to 6 years.

Vaccines—one of public health's greatest accomplishments—are offered by the county Department of Health through our Vaccines for Children (VFC) program and our Adult Immunization Program. For further information, call 845-808-1332 or 808-1390.

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