

California struggles with high number of unvaccinated children

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People take pictures with Disney characters at Disneyland, Thursday, Jan. 22, 2015, in Anaheim, California. A major measles outbreak traced to Disneyland has brought criticism down on the small but vocal movement among parents to opt out of vaccinations for their children. Photo: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

SANTA ANA, Calif. — In response to a growing measles outbreak that started at Disneyland a month ago, health officials in Orange County, California, ordered about two dozen high school students to stay home from school because they may not have been vaccinated against the disease.

Officials have described the current spread of measles as the worst outbreak in California in 15 years. There are now more than 70 patients across California, six other states, and Mexico.

Health officials pulled the students out of class at Huntington Beach High School. They took the precaution after learning that a student with measles had gone to class when school resumed in January. They said they would take the same action in other schools if measles are detected.

Fast-Spreading Disease

Measles causes a rash that first appears on the head and then spreads to the rest of the body. Other symptoms include fever, red eyes and a runny nose. Spread by simply coughing and sneezing, measles can be contagious for four days before the rash appears and four days after.

"If there is a case in the school and their child is not immunized, they will be removed from the school for 21 days," said Dr. Eric Handler, the Orange County public health officer. "From an epidemiological standpoint, in order to prevent spread of the disease, this is a necessary measure."

Epidemiologists study public health and how diseases spread.

There is a vaccine against measles that is highly effective. However, some parents choose not to give their children the shots because of personal beliefs. Orange County is home to several upscale communities where a higher-than-average number of parents have chosen not to vaccinate their kids.

Experts say this becomes a serious problem when 8 percent or more of a group of people are not vaccinated.

Many Children Are Unprotected

In the Huntington Beach City School District, many kindergarten classes have more than 8 percent of students who are not vaccinated. At S. A. Moffett Elementary, 10 percent were not vaccinated. At Huntington Seacliff Elementary, it was 11 percent.

As of 2013, only 3.1 percent of kindergartners statewide were unvaccinated,

Since 2002, fewer and fewer kindergartners have been starting elementary school with all their vaccinations. Some parents are suspicious of the shots, worrying that they cause autism, even though many scientific reports have thoroughly shown that they do not.

"The vaccine is safe," Handler said. "We can prevent this disease if people get vaccinated."

Many parents of this generation have never seen children kept home from school because they were not caught up on their shots. Some public health experts say it's time to do that again.

It Only Takes One Sneeze Or Cough

Measles is so infectious — it spreads through the droplets from a sneeze or cough — that one sick person walking through a community of unvaccinated people can infect a dozen or more of them.

“If the rate of unimmunized is as high as it seems to be, you’re going to get more cases, and then you’re going to get more spread from those,” said Dr. James Cherry, a UCLA pediatric infectious diseases researcher.

The measles vaccine has been around since 1963 in the United States, but there were still major outbreaks of measles nationwide in 1976-77 and 1989-91.

In 1977, about 50,000 students in Los Angeles County were told to stay home from school until they could confirm that had been vaccinated or were getting the shots. Within days, most them returned to school having been vaccinated, and the measles cases dropped quickly.

Some parents today, faced with the measles outbreak, are rethinking their decisions to not vaccinate their children.

Rethinking Vaccine Decisions

A mother at Mariners Park in Newport Beach said that after her daughter Sienna was born 2 1/2 years ago, she wanted to follow an alternative vaccine schedule — different than official recommendations. The schedule, published in “The Vaccine Book” by Dr. Robert Sears, delays or skips certain immunizations, much to the dismay of public health officials.

“I didn’t want to flood her system with a bunch of chemicals all at once. I wanted to be informed and not trust what medical professionals said,” the mother, Stephanie, said. She asked that her last name not be used, citing concerns about her family’s privacy.

But the outbreak worries her, and she said her daughter will get vaccinated next month. “It was a hard decision,” she added.

Some parents who vaccinated their children are concerned by the risk caused by unvaccinated children.

“It scares me,” Julie Angus said while walking her preschooler Mia, 4, and first-grader Gabriel, 6, home from school.

“They’re making a decision for their child that affects other children. I personally feel that if that’s your choice you should home-school your child,” Angus said.

It Started At Disneyland

Public health officials believe the current measles outbreak began at Disneyland a week before Christmas. The theme park attracts visitors from all over the world, including places in Europe and Asia where measles is still a serious problem.

Since then, the disease has continued to spread by people who were not vaccinated.

Five of the diagnosed measles patients were Disneyland employees. Of the employees at Disneyland diagnosed with measles, two have been vaccinated, health officials said. The vaccination status of the other workers was still being investigated.