

MEDIA REPOSENSE

15 March 2019

The measles outbreak: Are your children protected?

Parents in the Nelson, Tasman and Marlborough region are urged to make sure their children are immunised against measles, and to be alert to symptoms of the highly-contagious and harmful disease.

Dr Andrew Lindsay, Medical Officer of Health with the Nelson Marlborough Public Health Service, says that while there are no current cases, it is likely measles will arrive in the region given the current widespread outbreak in the Canterbury region.

Dr Lindsay says that parents should check their children's Well Child immunisation record (the 'Plunket book') to see if their child is immunised. If in doubt, they should call their GP or practice nurse to check immunisation status.

On 14 March the Ministry of Health advised all DHBs (excluding Canterbury DHB) to maintain the National Childhood Immunisation Schedule for MMR vaccination at ages 15 months and 4 years. This means that the focus is to ensure that children 4 years and under have had at least one dose of the MMR vaccine.

A message to parents

Dr Lindsay appeals to any parents who may have delayed their children's MMR vaccination, or declined it.

"Immunisation is the best protection against this harmful, potentially-fatal disease. New Zealand children should not have to suffer measles.

"Children need two doses of the MMR vaccine to be fully immunised, but one dose of MMR provides 95% protection. So if you have delayed or declined your child's vaccination please book them in for that important first dose," Dr Lindsay says.

"Some parents may perceive measles to be a rare, or low-risk illness. The current outbreaks in Canterbury and the USA, as well as frequent outbreaks overseas, prove this to be a misconception. In 2017, more than 30 people died in Europe from measles.

"The MMR vaccine is safe and effective. If you have any questions about the vaccine, contact your GP, practice nurse of the Immunisation Advisory Centre on 0800 IMMUNE. "

Dr Lindsay says that people should also consider the potential for non-vaccination to harm others.

"Immunisation is not just about your health, it's also about helping to protect the community, including people too young or vulnerable to be immunised."

About measles:

- Measles is a notifiable, highly-infectious disease spread through coughing and sneezing

- The first symptoms include a fever (temperature over 38.5 C), cough, runny nose, and sore and watery 'pink' eyes. Small white spots might appear on the back inner cheek of your mouth.
- After 3-4 days a blotchy rash appears, usually starting on the face and behind the ears.
- People are infectious from five days before the onset of the rash to five days after the rash starts and should stay in isolation during this time.

What to do if you suspect you or someone you know has measles:

If you detect any of the symptoms listed above, call Healthline (0800 611 116) first before going to your doctor or medical centre.

"Measles can spread to others in a waiting room very quickly. This is why it is important, if you have measles symptoms, to phone quickly for advice before visiting a waiting room.

"You should also stay away from work, school or public places, to help prevent putting other people at risk. This also applies if you or a family member aren't fully immunised and may have been in contact with someone with measles."

More information about measles is available on the Ministry of Health website: <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/measles>

About measles vaccination:

- You are considered immune if they were born before 1969 or you've received two doses of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR) after the age of one. If you have definitely had measles in the past you are also considered to be immune.
- Under the New Zealand Immunisation Schedule, children are eligible for free vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella (the MMR vaccine) when they are 15 months old, and again at 4 years old. The schedule is available online here: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/preventative-health-wellness/immunisation/new-zealand-immunisation-schedule>
- Information about the MMR vaccine is available on the Immunisation Advisory Centre's website: <http://www.immune.org.nz/hot-topic/measles-overseas-and-new-zealand>

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