

AROUND ONE IN TEN CHILDREN STARTING SCHOOL AT RISK OF MEASLES

Let's protect our children from childhood diseases warns Dr Hazel Fofie

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the NHS are calling on parents and guardians to ensure their children are up to date with the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, and all other routine childhood immunisations, as the latest data shows MMR vaccination uptake has dropped to the lowest level in a decade.

Coverage for the two doses of MMR vaccine in five year olds in England is currently 85.5%, well below the 95% World Health Organisation's target needed to achieve and sustain measles elimination. It is even as low as 73% of five year olds in London that have had their second MMR dose. Coverage of the first dose of the MMR vaccine in 2 year olds has also dropped below 90%. This means that more than 1 in 10 children under the age of 5 are not fully protected from measles and are at risk of catching it.

In a new campaign drive, parents and guardians are being reminded that during the pandemic, the NHS has continued to provide routine childhood immunisations and they are crucial in protecting children against preventable diseases.

Measles is highly contagious so even a small decline in MMR uptake can lead to a rise in cases. Measles can lead to complications such as ear infections, pneumonia, and inflammation of the brain which require hospitalisation and on rare occasions can lead to long term disability or death. Since the introduction of the measles vaccine in 1968 it is estimated that 20 million measles cases and 4,500 deaths have been prevented in the UK.

New research commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care and the UKHSA, conducted by Censuswide, shows that many parents are not aware of the risks measles poses to their unvaccinated children.

Out of 2,000 parents and guardians of children aged five and under:

- Almost half (48%) are not aware that measles can lead to serious complications such as pneumonia and brain inflammation
- Only 4 in 10 (38%) are aware measles can be fatal
- More than half of parents (56%) are not aware that two doses of the MMR vaccine give 99% protection against measles and rubella

Children are offered two doses of the MMR vaccine by their registered GP surgery, the first when they turn 1 and the second at around 3 years and 4 months, before they start nursery or school. The NHS has continued to prioritise routine vaccinations throughout the pandemic, however some parents who haven't had their child vaccinated against MMR said this was because they didn't realise the NHS was still offering appointments, or they didn't want to burden the NHS.

Dr Hazel Fofie, London-based Paediatrician, says:

“Measles is one of the most contagious diseases and there is no specific treatment, and just a small drop in vaccine coverage can lead to outbreaks in schools and nurseries. Measles can be mild, however, it can lead to serious health complications, especially in children younger than 5 years old. It can cause severe infection of the lungs and seizures due to inflammation of the brain, leaving some children with disabilities for life.”

“As international travel starts returning to pre-pandemic levels, we're likely to see a spike in measles infections, from countries where measles is still common so by getting your children vaccinated you're protecting them from potentially deadly illnesses and stopping outbreaks in the community.”

“Around the world, many millions of doses have been safely administered to children, saving countless lives. Thanks to vaccines, we don't hear about smallpox and polio in the UK anymore, but these were once common diseases that terrified parents.”

“Not only is the MMR vaccine thoroughly tested and safe, the data tells us it's highly effective. Two doses of the vaccine give 99% protection against measles and rubella. All children should get their first MMR vaccine when they're one, and a second dose at three years and four months, just before they start school. Even if your children missed out and are older, it's never too late to go and get the vaccine. If you're unsure if they've had it already, check their Red Book and if still unsure contact your GP practice.”

“Routine vaccinations are offered for free on the NHS to all babies and children. I would encourage parents or guardians of children who are not up to date with their two doses of MMR vaccine to contact their GP practice to book an appointment. Routine vaccine services have been running as normal throughout the pandemic, so don't worry about contacting your doctor.”

TV doctor and mum, Dr Zoe Williams says, “As a GP and mother of an infant, I know first-hand how important these vaccines are at keeping our children safe against the threat of measles, mumps and rubella.”

“I know that I am not alone when I say that my child’s safety is my number one priority, which is why I cannot urge people enough to make sure their child is fully vaccinated against these diseases. No matter what age your child is, if they have missed out on their routine vaccines, you should contact your GP practice to get them vaccinated as soon as possible.”

Find out more at [nhs.uk/MMR](https://www.nhs.uk/MMR)