

Media Release

International measles outbreaks prompt renewed call for MMR vaccination

28 February 2019

The Ministry of Health is reminding travellers to make sure they are immunised against measles following outbreaks overseas. Outbreaks have recently been reported in the Philippines and in parts of Europe.

Since 2012, all cases of measles in New Zealand came from travellers bringing the disease from overseas.

Since the beginning of this year, New Zealand has seen an increase in measles cases with 18 cases reported. All of these cases followed a measles case imported from overseas. There are currently three on-going outbreaks, two in the Waikato and a new one in Christchurch.

The Ministry's Director of Public Health Dr Caroline McElnay says the concern comes when the disease is brought into the country. "Approximately 90% of children under 13 years old are fully immunised with two doses of MMR vaccine. However, only about 80% of teenagers and young adults have received the full course of the vaccine and are vulnerable to catching measles."

"As a result, there are often outbreaks occurring in this older age group and there is a risk that measles becomes established in New Zealand again."

"That's why it's so important people travelling overseas make sure they are fully immunised against measles before they go," says Dr McElnay. "This will protect them from getting measles and reduce the risk of bringing measles back into this country." "In particular, the Ministry's clinicians are recommending infants aged 6-15 months travelling to countries where there is a current measles outbreak be given MMR vaccine before they travel."

"Children who have not yet been immunised are at greatest risk of the disease. While measles immunisation is usually given at age 15 months and 4 years in New Zealand, it's important to stress the MMR vaccine is safe to give to children as young as 6 months. "

"What's more, the MMR vaccination is free."

"Two doses of MMR vaccine gives long-lasting immunity, protecting at least 95% of people.

Dr McElnay says many teenagers and young adults have missed one or both doses of the vaccine, and may be unaware that they are not immune. "If you're not sure whether your vaccination is up to date, you can check in with your general practice. If you can't remember and end up inadvertently getting a third MMR dose, that's okay too. It's safe."

The Ministry has also released an advisory to health professionals urging practices to be alert to the possibility of measles among patients who have recently travelled.

FURTHER INFORMATION

An up-to-date list of countries with a measles outbreak can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/travelers.html>.

Ministry of Health measles information is available at: <http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/measles>

SafeTravel.govt.nz has added a message to its website advising all travellers to ensure that their measles vaccination is up-to-date prior to overseas travel.

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