

Measles Outbreaks Trigger Vaccine Push in U.S. Virgin Islands

Health Commissioner Encarnacion stresses the urgency of boosting childhood vaccine rates amidst escalating measles cases in the region

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As measles outbreaks continue to surge across the United States and the Caribbean, VI Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion is calling on parents in the U.S. Virgin Islands to start or keep up with their children's vaccination schedules.

Ms. Encarnacion this week expressed her concerns about the notably low childhood vaccine rates in the territory, especially given the looming threat of measles. "We are very concerned about the low childhood vaccine rate in the Territory, especially with measles threatening the US," she stated. Currently, only 60 percent of USVI children are vaccinated, a statistic that is exacerbated by an increasing number of parents seeking vaccination exemptions.

The urgency of this issue is highlighted by the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control, which issues weekly updates on measles outbreaks. As of June 6, 2024, there have been 151 measles cases reported across 22 jurisdictions including states like Arizona, California, Florida, and New York, with over half of these cases resulting in hospitalizations.

The V.I. Department of Health is particularly alarmed by the infectiousness of the disease. "While 151 may seem like a low number, it is alarming because one person can infect nine to ten others," Encarnacion explained. She also raised concerns about the potential spread to the USVI and neighboring regions, citing recent developments in the Turks and Caicos Islands, which reported its first measles cases since 1991 this past May.

In response to these threats, DOH launched the "Be Wise, Immunize" campaign earlier in the year. This initiative seeks to educate parents on the critical importance of vaccinations, emphasizing that immunization offers the best protection against diseases like measles both in childhood and later in life.

The primary defense against measles is the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine. This vaccine is noted for providing long-lasting protection against all strains of the virus. Measles can lead to severe health complications, particularly in children under five years old, including pneumonia and encephalitis.

Measles is highly contagious and can spread through the air by coughs or sneezes of infected persons. It remains active in the air or on surfaces for up to two hours, and symptoms typically appear seven to 14 days after exposure. These include high fever, cough, runny nose, red watery eyes, and a characteristic rash.

Despite being declared eliminated in the United States in 2000, measles persists globally and is frequently imported into the U.S. by unvaccinated travelers.

The VI Department of Health urges parents to ensure their children are vaccinated and provides resources for scheduling immunization appointments at www.doh.vi.gov/immunization.