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## **Child's Death Under Investigation as Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease Cases Rise USVI; Measles a Growing Concern**

**Health officials confirm surging hand, food and mouth disease cases and urge parents to take precautions after a child suspected of having the virus passed away. Rising measles cases on the mainland also prompt warnings for travelers to get vaccinated.**

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Janeke Simon **March 11, 2025**

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The spread of hand, foot and mouth disease among young Virgin Islanders continues to worry health authorities in the territory. Measles outbreaks on the mainland are also a concern at the U.S. Department of Health, officials said during a press conference on Tuesday.

Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, assistant health commissioner, began by expressing condolences to a family who lost a young child on Monday. While the cause of death is still under investigation, “the child was suspected of having HFMD and was later taken to the emergency room,” Dr. Craigwell-Syms said. “We urge the community to remain vigilant and to prioritize their health and well-being.”

While hand, foot, and mouth disease is largely mild, it is highly contagious and in severe cases can lead to life-threatening complications, especially in the youngest children. The viral illness spreads via respiratory droplets, contact with the stool of an infected person or the fluid from blisters. Viral particles can linger on surfaces and infect those who come into contact. Good preventative practice includes frequent handwashing with soap and water, disinfecting frequently touched surfaces such as door knobs, and avoiding close contact with infected individuals.

“Parents and caregivers should be especially vigilant in practicing good hand hygiene and in monitoring their children for symptoms, keeping them at home if they are ill,” said Dr. Anthony Ricketts of St. Croix’s Pediatric Care Center.

“Symptoms include fever, a sore throat, painful mouth ulcers that may blister and a rash on the hands and feet,” Dr. Ricketts continued, telling parents what to look for. If children are sick, “supportive care includes staying hydrated with plenty of fluids, using over the counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever and discomfort, applying soothing mouth rinses or sprays to relieve throat pain, ensuring adequate rest to support recovery.” Children should be closely monitored for more serious symptoms including prolonged fever, dehydration or worsening blisters, which according to Dr. Ricketts “may indicate complications requiring medical care.”

There are now 189 reported cases of hand, foot and mouth disease in the territory, with one of those occurring on St. Croix, and the rest on St. Thomas. The DOH Epidemiology Division continues to provide telephone consultations and in-person visits to schools and daycares affected by HFMD cases as they monitor the ongoing outbreak.

A rise in cases of measles across the mainland is also cause for concern among DOH officials. Alaska, Texas, Mexico, California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York City, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Washington have all reported measles cases, said territorial epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis. As a result, “the CDC released travel guidance strongly advising individuals and families to get vaccinated before traveling to outbreak areas in the U.S. and abroad.”

Dr. Ellis reminded that measles is “highly contagious and can cause serious health complications, particularly in children under five years old.” While there have not been any documented cases in the territory thus far, Dr. Ricketts advised that given the high rate of travel between the Virgin Islands and the mainland, there should be “a very high index of suspicion” should a child present with one or more of the associated symptoms of measles – a rash, red eyes, cough or very high fever. “Any child who has a rash which is generally unexplained or hasn’t been seen before, should definitely seek guidance from their healthcare provider.”