

## Low Vaccination Rates Put USVI at Risk for Measles Outbreak, Health Officials Warn

With childhood vaccination rates at 60%, DOH officials say the USVI is vulnerable to a measles outbreak. Experts urge parents to reconsider the MMR vaccine, warning that 40% of the population is unvaccinated and could be infected if measles arrives

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Relatively low rates of vaccination among the population leaves the territory at risk of a larger-than-otherwise outbreak of measles, should the highly infectious disease reach our shores, according to local health officials.

“Currently, the USVI childhood vaccine rate is at 60% with more and more parents applying for exemptions,” said V.I. Department of Health Assistant Commissioner Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms

during a press conference on Monday. “This low vaccination rate puts our children and community at greater risk.”

Ideally, the share of the population vaccinated against measles and other childhood diseases should be “as high as possible,” said Dr. Esther Ellis, Territorial Epidemiologist for DOH. Firstly, vaccinated child receive protection against severe disease even if they are ultimately infected, she explained. Secondly, “when the vaccination rate falls below a certain number...the population is considered not to have herd immunity anymore,” Dr. Ellis noted. The absence of herd immunity means that “we're susceptible for an outbreak to occur here, because there's 40% of our population that's unvaccinated and can get the measles very easily if it's brought in here,” she said.

Due to the effectiveness of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, measles was declared eradicated in the United States 25 years ago. However, after debunked studies purporting to show causal links between the vaccine and autism were published by former physician Andrew Wakefield and amplified by celebrity voices – Jenny McCarthy most notably – the measles began a resurgence as parents began to refrain from vaccinating their children.

The vaccination rate in the territory has dropped “significantly” since the pandemic, according to Dr. Anthony Ricketts, who spoke alongside DOH officials at the press briefing. He attributed the decline to skepticism surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine, which led to an overall decrease in immunization rates. As Dr. Ricketts explained, the days of someone being able to avoid measles infection while remaining unvaccinated are likely over, as there are insufficient numbers of vaccinated people in the community to ensure that outbreaks do not take hold. “If one person comes to this community with measles, you're probably going to see a spread within days of a lot of unimmunized people,” he predicted. Measles can cause serious complications requiring hospitalization, and two deaths have been reported thus far in the current outbreak on the mainland.

Territorial health officials said they will remain vigilant in monitoring for any sign of measles within the community. Education about the benefits of vaccination is also important and will continue, said Dr. Ellis. However, the biggest factor in preventing the spread of measles in the Virgin Islands is by “reconsidering the MMR vaccine,” said Dr. Ricketts. “The measles vaccine is shown to be extremely effective,” he noted. “Ask questions of your provider so we are not just going on an emotional whim, but get the answers that would help you in making an informed decision about vaccinating your child.”