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DOH Urges Measles Vaccination Amid U.S. Outbreak; Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease Cases Rise in Territory

DOH urges residents to get the MMR vaccine as U.S. measles cases surpass 300, with low local vaccination rates raising concern. Meanwhile, Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease cases in the territory have reached 255, with most reported in St. Thomas.

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As measles cases rise across the United States, the V.I. Department of Health said on Tuesday it is closely monitoring the situation alongside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health officials are urging residents, particularly those traveling, to ensure their Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) vaccinations are up to date to prevent an outbreak in the territory.

Additionally, the department has reported an increase in Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease (HFMD) cases in the U.S. Virgin Islands and is advising parents, caregivers, and healthcare providers to remain vigilant in preventing further spread.

According to the CDC, as of Friday, more than 300 measles cases have been confirmed across 15 jurisdictions in the U.S. This includes major outbreaks in Texas and New Mexico, where there have been 259 and 35 confirmed cases, respectively, each resulting in one fatality—both among unvaccinated individuals.

In addition, one to three cases have been confirmed in 13 other states: Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, New York City, New York State, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. The CDC reports that 95% of cases involve unvaccinated individuals or those with unknown vaccine status.

With spring and summer travel season approaching, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion emphasized the importance of vaccination at a Government House press briefing. "The Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) vaccine is the most effective protection against measles," she stated. "We strongly encourage all residents, particularly those traveling internationally, to be up to date on their MMR vaccinations. With the crisis that we are facing nationally, parents should ensure their children receive the vaccine as soon as possible."

The CDC recommends that at least 95% of a community be immunized to achieve herd immunity and prevent the spread of measles. However, Ms. Encarnacion noted that MMR vaccine coverage among children aged 12 months to 6 years in the Virgin Islands is currently just 44.32%, far below the necessary threshold.

With territory-wide vaccination rates between 44% and 60%, Ms. Encarnacion expressed serious concern about the potential for measles to spread in the Virgin Islands. The MMR vaccine is crucial in protecting infants, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals, reducing the risk of large outbreaks and strain on healthcare systems.

The MMR vaccine is available for children and adults at multiple locations across the territory:

For Children:

- St. Thomas: St. Thomas East End Medical Center, Partners 4Kids, ANS Pediatrics PLLC, Wilson Healthcare Consultants, and the VI Department of Health's Maternal Child Health Division.
- St. Croix: North Shore Health Center, Frederiksted Health Care, Inc., Pediatric Care Center, Island Pediatrics LLC, and the VI Department of Health's Maternal Child Health Division.

For Adults:

- St. Thomas: Walgreens Pharmacy, Kmart Pharmacy, Red Hook Family Practice, Yacht Haven Family Practice, and Wilson Healthcare Consultants.
- St. Croix: Neighborhood Pharmacy, Community Health St. Croix, Frederiksted Health Clinic, and Primary Care LLC.

Alongside measles concerns, the Department of Health is monitoring an increase in Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease (HFMD) cases in the U.S. Virgin Islands. As of Tuesday, 255 cases have been

reported—250 in St. Thomas and five in St. Croix. No cases have been confirmed on St. John, though some infected children may reside there and seek care on St. Thomas.

"We ask you as parents, caregivers, healthcare providers, and the entire community to remain vigilant," Commissioner Encarnacion urged.

HFMD is highly contagious, particularly among children under five years old. Symptoms include fever, sore throat, painful mouth sores, and a rash on the hands and feet. The illness typically resolves within 7 to 10 days, but proper care is essential to ensure recovery.

To help children recover from HFMD, health officials recommend:

- Ensuring hydration.
- Using acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen for fever and discomfort.
- Applying saltwater or baking soda mouth rinses to ease inflammation.
- Using oral gels for younger children unable to rinse.
- Encouraging rest to aid recovery.

Parents are advised not to use aspirin for viral infections due to the risk of Reye's syndrome, a rare but serious condition affecting the liver and brain.

The virus spreads through respiratory droplets, contaminated surfaces, and direct contact with fluids from blisters or stool. Parents and caregivers should:

- Practice proper hand hygiene.
- Disinfect frequently touched surfaces.
- Keep infected children home from school or daycare until they are fever-free for at least 24 hours without medication and any blisters or rashes have dried.

The DOH's Epidemiology Division said it is actively collaborating with schools and daycare facilities, offering consultations and in-person visits in locations where HFMD cases have been reported.

To report HFMD cases, schools and daycare providers are encouraged to email epi@doh.vi.gov.

DOH said it continues to monitor both measles and HFMD while urging residents to take precautions to protect their health.