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With Over Half of USVI Children Unvaccinated, Health Officials Urge Action as U.S. Measles Outbreaks Grow

With 14 active measles outbreaks and over 1,000 cases reported nationwide, VI health officials have mailed 500 letters to families with vaccine exemptions, urging immediate MMR vaccination to protect children and prevent a potential local outbreak.

Health / **Published On May 11, 2025 06:25 AM /**

Staff Consortium **May 11, 2025**

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With measles cases in the United States now exceeding 1,000 and 14 active outbreaks (defined as three or more related cases) confirmed, the V.I. Department of Health said it is ramping up efforts to prevent the virus from reaching the territory. Health officials are making a direct appeal to unvaccinated families to reconsider their decision and take immediate action.

According to Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, the department is particularly concerned given the timing of increased travel during summer months. “We are very concerned about measles reaching our shores, especially as individuals and families travel to and from the U.S. Virgin Islands for summer vacation,” she said. “This is a critical time to take preventative action.”

Currently, more than 50 percent of USVI children under the age of six have not received the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine, placing a significant portion of the population at risk, DOH said.

In a move to proactively reduce vulnerability in the territory, the department's Immunization Division on Friday mailed approximately 500 letters to parents and guardians who had previously requested and received exemptions from routine childhood vaccinations. The letter, signed by Encarnacion, strongly encourages families to vaccinate their children against measles, mumps, and rubella.

“Measles is one of the most contagious viruses known, and unvaccinated children are at significant risk of becoming seriously ill if exposed,” the letter states. “We are deeply concerned by the growing number of cases on the mainland and want to prevent a similar outbreak here in the Virgin Islands.”

The communication also explains the serious complications that can result from measles infection, including pneumonia, brain swelling or encephalitis, hearing loss, and even death.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), receiving two doses of the MMR vaccine provides 97 percent protection against measles and is considered both safe and effective.

The CDC’s most recent update reports 1,001 confirmed measles cases across 31 states. Approximately 96 percent of those infected were unvaccinated, and 30 percent were children under the age of five. The outbreak has so far resulted in three deaths—two children and one adult.

Health officials in the territory warn that the risk extends beyond individual families. Unvaccinated people pose a danger to vulnerable populations, including infants under one year of age, individuals with weakened immune systems, and pregnant women.

“Vaccination remains the best and most reliable defense we have,” said Commissioner Encarnacion. “We’re asking parents to act now, not just for their children, but for the health of the entire community.”

The department’s ongoing education campaign includes outreach via radio, social media, and the distribution of printed materials. The effort to reach parents directly is just one facet of a broader initiative to raise awareness and encourage vaccination.

In April, Encarnacion activated the Public Health Preparedness and Immunization divisions, which have been working in collaboration with Chief Medical Officer Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar and Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis to prepare for a potential outbreak in the Virgin Islands.

These preparedness efforts involve coordination with healthcare providers, federally qualified health centers, and hospitals across the territory to ensure a timely and effective response if cases emerge.

Parents with questions about the MMR vaccine or seeking help with scheduling vaccination appointments are encouraged to contact the Maternal Child Health Clinic at:

- (340) 777-8804 in St. Thomas
- (340) 712-0131 in St. Croix

For the most up-to-date information on measles and other health advisories, residents can visit:
<https://www.cdc.gov/measles/index.html>.

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