Texas Measles Outbreak Nears 100 Cases, Raising Concerns About Undetected Spread

Local health officials have been trying to persuade the parents of unvaccinated children to protect their kids.

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Some private schools have shut down because of a rapidly escalating measles outbreak in West Texas. Local health departments are overstretched, pausing other important work as they race to limit the spread of this highly contagious virus.

Since the outbreak emerged three weeks ago, the Texas health department has confirmed 90 cases with 16 hospitalizations, as of Feb. 21. Most of those infected are under age 18. Officials suspect that nine additional measles cases reported in New Mexico, across the border from the epicenter of the Texas outbreak in Gaines County, are linked to the Texas outbreak. Ongoing investigations seek to confirm that connection.

Health officials worry they're missing cases. Undetected infections bode poorly for communities because doctors and health officials can't contain transmission if they can't identify who is infected.

"This is the tip of the iceberg," said Rekha Lakshmanan, chief strategy officer for The Immunization Partnership in Houston, a nonprofit that advocates for vaccine access. "I think this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better."

An unknown number of parents may not be taking sick children to clinics where they could be tested, said Katherine Wells, the public health director in Lubbock, Texas. "If your kids are responding to fever reducers and you're keeping hydrated, some people may keep them at home," she said.

Most unvaccinated people will contract measles if they're exposed to the airborne virus, which can linger for up to two hours indoors. Those infected can spread the disease before they have symptoms. Around 1 in 5 people with measles end up hospitalized, 1 in 10 children develop ear infections that can lead to permanent hearing loss, and about 1 in 1,000 children die from respiratory and neurological conditions.

Gaines has a large Mennonite population, which often shuns vaccinations. “We respect everyone’s right to vaccinate or not get vaccinated,” said Albert Pilkington, CEO of the Seminole Hospital District, in the heart of the county, in an interview with Texas Standard. “That’s just what it means to be an American, right?”

Local health officials have been trying to persuade the parents of unvaccinated children to protect their kids by bringing them to pop-up clinics offering measles vaccines.

“Some people who were on the fence, who thought measles wasn’t something their kids would see, are recalculating and coming forward for vaccination,” Wells said.

Local health departments are also operating mobile testing units outside schools in an attempt to detect infections before they spread. They’re staffing clinics that can provide treatment prophylactically for infants exposed to the virus, who are too young for vaccination. Local health officials are advising day care centers on how to protect young children and babies, and educating school nurses on how to spot signs of the disease.

“I am putting 75% of my staff on this outbreak,” Wells said. Although Lubbock isn’t at the center of the outbreak, people infected have sought treatment there. “If someone infected was in the [emergency room], we need to identify everyone who was in that ER within two hours of that visit, notify them, and find out if they were vaccinated.”

Local health departments in rural areas are notoriously underfunded. Wells said the workload has meant pressing pause on other programs, such as one providing substance abuse education.

Zach Holbrooks, executive director of the South Plains Public Health District, which includes Gaines, said health officials were following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, as of last year, by advising schools to keep unvaccinated children home for 21 days if they shared a classroom or the cafeteria with someone infected. This means that many parents may need to stay home from work to care for their kids.

“A lot of private schools have closed down because of a high number of sick children,” Holbrooks said.

The burden of measles outbreaks multiplies as the disease spreads. Curbing a 2018 outbreak in Washington state with 72 cases cost about $2.3 million, in addition to $76,000 in medical costs, and an estimated $1 million in economic losses due to illness, quarantines, and caregiving.

Public health researchers expect such outbreaks to become larger and more common because of scores of laws around the U.S. — pending and recently passed — that ultimately lower vaccine rates by allowing parents to exempt their children from vaccine requirements at public schools and some private schools.

Such policies are coupled with misinformation about childhood vaccination now platformed at the highest levels of government. The new director of the Department of Health and Human Services,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has erroneously blamed vaccines for autism, pointing to discredited theories shown to be untrue by more than a dozen scientific studies.

In Kennedy's first week on the job, HHS postponed an important meeting of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, without saying when it would resume. In addition, the CDC's letter template to school principals, advising unvaccinated children to remain home from school for 21 days if they've been exposed to the measles virus, is no longer on the agency's website. An old version remains posted on its archive.

As a rule, at least 95% of people need to be vaccinated against measles for a community to be well protected. That threshold is high enough to protect infants too young for the vaccine, people who can't take the vaccine for medical reasons, and anyone who doesn't mount a strong, lasting immune response to it. Last school year, the number of kindergartners exempted from a vaccine requirement was higher than ever reported before, according to the CDC.

In Gaines, exemptions were far higher than the national average, approaching 20% in 2023-24. Gaines has one of the lowest rates of childhood vaccination in Texas. At a local public school district in the community of Loop, only 46% of kindergarten students have gotten vaccines that protect against measles.

Amid an outbreak that displays the toll of measles in under-vaccinated pockets of America, Texas lawmakers have filed about 25 bills in this year's legislative session that could limit vaccination further. Lakshmanan said the public — the majority of whom believe in the benefits of measles vaccination — should contact their representatives about the danger of such decisions. Her group and others offer resources to get involved.

"We've got children winding up in the hospital, and yet lawmakers who've got their blinders on," she said, referring to pending policies that will erode vaccination rates. "It's just mind-blowing."

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