



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY
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Public Health, Schools Preparing for Possibility of Measles

Local school and public health officials are working together to prepare for the possibility of a measles outbreak in Lewis and Clark County.

Staff of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department recently met with School District 1 officials and mailed letters to principals across the county. They're encouraging schools to prepare for measles given the growing chance that the disease will hit locally. They're also encouraging school staff and students' parents to make sure their children are vaccinated.

An outbreak of measles started in California at the end of last year and has since spread to seven other western states. So far, there have been no cases in Montana.

"But it's only a day's drive from Lewis and Clark County," said Karen Dobson Wandel, public health nurse supervisor at the health department. "I think we have to assume that it could show up here, especially as people travel for spring break at the end of the month. We want to be ready."

Measles is not "just a little rash," she added. It can cause serious health complications, especially in children under age 5 and adults over 20. Complications can include ear infections, diarrhea, pneumonia, and encephalitis (brain swelling). For every 1,000 children who get measles, one or two will die from it, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Measles also may cause pregnant women to give birth prematurely or have a low-birth-weight baby.

The disease is so contagious that if one person has it, 9 out of 10 people around him or her will also become infected if they're not immune to the disease, Wandel said. Travelers who aren't immune have an increased risk of infection.

"We encourage families who are planning a trip for spring break to check for measles activity at their vacation destination and vaccinate any family members who need it," Wandel said.

The best way to protect against measles is to get the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine. Children are routinely vaccinated at 12-15 months of age and then again at 4-6 years of age.

The mission of the Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department is to improve and protect the health of all county residents.

“The MMR is a safe and very effective vaccine,” Wandel said. “Because of it, measles was essentially eliminated from the U.S. by 2000, but we’re seeing a resurgence. There were more than 600 cases nationwide last year, and we’ve already seen 176 in the first 10 weeks of 2015.”

Children and adolescents who haven’t been vaccinated can get catch-up MMR shots at any age over 1. Parents should allow at least 4 weeks between the two doses.

Adults who don’t have evidence of immunity to measles should get at least one dose of MMR, public health experts recommend. Acceptable evidence includes at least one of the following:

- written documentation of adequate vaccination
- lab test showing evidence of immunity
- lab confirmation of having had measles
- birth before 1957

“We really encourage everyone who works with children to be sure they’re immune,” Wandel said.

The health department offers MMR vaccinations at its regular walk-in immunization clinics Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1930 Ninth Avenue. No appointment is needed, and the clinic can bill all insurance providers.

More information about measles is available from the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department, 457-2584, your personal health-care provider, or online at www.cdc.gov/measles/index.html.

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