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**Health Officials Urge Residents to Be Prepared for Measles**

Local health officials are preparing for the likely chance that measles will make its way to Lewis and Clark County in the near future. They’re also urging residents to take steps now to protect themselves, their children, and their community.

Employees of Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH) gathered with about a dozen school and medical providers Thursday to talk about how they’ll work together to identify and respond to even a single suspected case of measles.

Montana hasn’t seen measles since 1990, according to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. The serious and highly contagious disease was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000 due to successful vaccination efforts.

But recent outbreaks in New York and Washington State have prompted health officials to be concerned and proactive.

“Measles are serious and they spread very easily,” said Shelly Maag, public health nurse supervisor at LCPH. “And Washington is only a day’s drive or a short flight away.

“What’s sad about these outbreaks is that measles are preventable,” she added. “The vaccine has proven to be very safe and effective. Two doses of MMR are about 97 percent effective.”

Measles are caused by a respiratory virus that spreads through the air when a sick person coughs or sneezes. The disease is so contagious that you can get it just by being in a room with a person who’s infected – and even up to two hours after the person leaves. Often someone can be sick and spreading the virus before they know they have it.

The disease starts with a high fever, cough, runny nose, and red eyes. Then a rash of tiny, red spots breaks out, starting at the head and spreading to the rest of the body. The disease can cause complications like pneumonia, swelling of the brain, and even death. People under age 5 and over age 20 are most susceptible to these serious complications.
Children are routinely vaccinated against measles when they’re a year old and again before they start kindergarten – unless it’s medically unadvisable or the family declares a religious exemption. In Lewis and Clark County, about 3 percent of public and private schoolchildren are not fully vaccinated for one or both of these reasons, Maag said.

She urged people who haven’t been fully vaccinated or aren’t sure whether they’re immune to contact their medical provider or the health department at 457-8900. LCPH offers walk-in immunization clinics Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 11:30 to 4:30 p.m. at 1930 Ninth Avenue in Helena. No appointment is needed.

“Anyone who got the two doses of MMR as a child is considered immune for life,” Maag said. “Adults should get at least one dose unless they have a record of childhood vaccination or written proof that they’re immune.”

People born before 1957 don’t need to be vaccinated because they were most likely exposed and developed immunity as children, when the disease was more common.

One reason vaccination is so important, Maag said, is that it helps to protect members of the community who can’t get the shot for medical reasons, like babies under a year old, pregnant women, and people with weak immune systems.

“If you think you or someone in your family might have measles, whatever you do, don’t race into the emergency room or urgent care,” Maag said. “Call your doctor first so they can discuss your symptoms and your travel history and figure out how to see you in a way that doesn’t infect other people. The last thing you want to do is infect a whole emergency room full of sick and injured people.”