

Measles Outbreak Tied to Copeland's Megachurch

Measles is making a worrisome resurgence across the U.S., with at least 135 documented cases this year—most recently at a Texas megachurch.

Measles, once a common childhood infection that killed up to 500 Americans a year, has been officially eradicated in the Western Hemisphere. For many years, the few dozen measles diagnoses in the U.S. were “imported” cases in individuals who traveled from countries where the virus remains common. High vaccination rates largely halted the virus at the North American border.

The country's safety net has become more porous in recent years. Although overall vaccination rates remain high, communities of like-minded parents who refuse immunizations for their children have been vulnerable to outbreaks.

The latest measles outbreak is in Texas, where the virus has sickened 25 people, most of whom are members or visitors of a church led by the daughter of televangelist Kenneth Copeland.

Fifteen of the measles cases are centered around Eagle Mountain International Church in Newark, Texas.

The outbreak was started by a visitor to the church who had recently traveled to a country where measles remains common, according to Tarrant County Public Health spokesman Al Roy.

Those sickened by measles include nine children and six adults, ranging in age from 4 months old to 44 years old. At least 12 of those infected were not fully immunized against measles, Roy said. The other patients have no record of being vaccinated. The 4-month-old is too young to have received the measles vaccine, which is typically given at 1, according to

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This is a classic example of how measles is being reintroduced," said William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert and professor at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville.

The U.S. has had more than twice as many confirmed measles cases this year than all of last year, when there were just 55, according to the CDC. Flare-ups brought on by foreign travel caused that number to spike as high as 220 measles cases in 2011.

New York City also has battled a measles epidemic this year, with at least 58 cases, mostly in close-knit Orthodox Jewish communities. City officials say the outbreak was started by someone who traveled to the United Kingdom which, along with Europe, has suffered large measles outbreaks in recent years. One of the New York children with measles developed pneumonia. Two pregnant women were hospitalized and one suffered a miscarriage, city health officials say.

Other vaccine-preventable diseases also have broken out in recent years, including whooping cough and mumps. Some whooping cough outbreaks have clustered around private schools with lax vaccination requirements, according to CDC studies.

Measles particularly alarms doctors because it spreads like lightning and kills one in every 1,000 people infected. Officials in Oklahoma—which hasn't had a measles case since 1997—said the Texas outbreak has put them on alert for signs of the virus, which produces a characteristic red rash and high fever, and infects about 90 percent of unimmunized people who are exposed to it. The virus can infect people even two hours after a sick person has left the room.

In an Aug. 21 statement, Lori Linstead, director of immunization services at the Oklahoma State Department of Health, said officials in her state, "are worried about the

current outbreak of measles in Texas, because measles is very contagious, spreads like wildfire and can be very serious.”

At the Texas church, the visitor infected not only the congregation and staff, but the church’s on-site day care center, according to an announcement on Eagle Mountain’s website. Health officials notified the church of the measles outbreak Aug. 14, and the church sponsored a vaccination clinic Aug. 18.

All of the school-age children infected in the Eagle Mountain outbreak were home-schooled, health officials say. Texas requires children be vaccinated before attending school.

In an Aug. 15 statement, Eagle Mountain’s pastor, Terri Pearsons, said she still has some reservations about vaccines.

“The concerns we have had are primarily with very young children who have family history of autism and with bundling too many immunizations at one time,” she said.

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