



Family Digest 52

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The Outbreak of Measles

Late in December 2022, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) announced that South Africa was experiencing measles outbreaks as a result of low vaccine coverage.¹ Over 300 cases had been reported. Limpopo recorded the first few cases at the beginning of October 2022, with further cases being reported in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Free State and the North West.²

Measles is a highly contagious respiratory disease that can be spread through contact with infected mucus and saliva. An infected person can release the virus into the air when they cough or sneeze. Symptoms include fever, a dry cough, inflamed and watery eyes, and skin rash. Sometimes, children may get ear infections, diarrhoea and vomiting when they have measles. Measles can cause severe complications and secondary infections which include pneumonia, severe diarrhoea, ear infections, blindness and encephalitis, and it can be fatal in children. In some instances it can also weaken children's immune systems, making them more vulnerable to other infections long after recovering from measles.³

Measles had virtually been eradicated due to vaccination. A spokesperson for the Department of Health explained that "measles is a vaccine-preventable disease and one of the reasons we still see outbreaks is we collectively have failed to attain a high enough vaccination coverage. And this means when measles is introduced into our communities there are sufficient unvaccinated persons to allow the virus to spread from person to person."⁴ This is particularly the case for children who have missed routine childhood immunizations. According to UNICEF, this outbreak has been attributed to consistently lower than optimal vaccine coverage of routine measles 1 and 2 doses, which increases the risk of being infected and of spreading the disease.⁵

The advent of COVID-19 and the lockdowns imposed to prevent its spread interrupted childhood vaccinations, with very poor clinic attendance for anything other than COVID-19 related visits. There were also occasional 'stock-outs' of the measles vaccine. A recent World Health Organization (WHO) report showed that the pandemic fuelled the largest sustained decline in childhood vaccine coverage rates.⁶ The Department of Health is presently embarking on a catch-up campaign in order to recover the levels of vaccination. UNICEF South Africa has called for "additional national and provincial government funding to be allocated to the measles response. These resources would strengthen vaccine administration and related services, as well as risk communication and community engagement to highlight the importance of routine immunization and to provide resources on how and where to access services".⁷

"The resurgence of deadly vaccine-preventable diseases underscores the importance of maintaining high vaccination coverage rates. Children everywhere must have access to all the recommended lifesaving vaccines they need. The disruptions observed during the COVID pandemic also highlight the importance of establishing resilient health systems. Systems must be able to withstand acute and prolonged shocks while delivering essential health services like immunisation programmes."⁸ Other, non-COVID related factors also impact on the efficacy of immunisation work. For example, the measles vaccine used in South Africa "must be stored in a freezer, and the reconstituted vaccine must be kept between 2°C and 8°C and used within six hours".⁹ Maintaining the cold chain is very important and may be challenging due to sustained and lengthy loadshedding.

Recent weeks have seen an increasing uptake of the vaccination and, as children return to school, collaboration between the Departments of Health and Basic Education is essential to ensure that all children are vaccinated and protected from this dangerous and highly contagious disease.

The links below provide further information regarding the measles outbreak:

<https://ewn.co.za/2022/12/30/measles-outbreak-in-sa-a-result-of-low-vaccine-coverage-nicd>

<https://theconversation.com/covid-pandemic-created-immunisation-gaps-in-africa-over-half-a-million-children-are-at-risk-190565>

<https://ewn.co.za/2022/12/29/measles-outbreak-has-spread-to-5-provinces-nicd>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-01-09-measles-outbreaks-confirmed-in-five-provinces-with-test-positivity-rate-skyrocketing/>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-01-10-concerned-gauteng-parents-come-out-in-numbers-to-vaccinate-children-amid-measles-outbreak/>

<https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/measles-outbreak-hits-four-provinces-and-threatens-health-children-across-south>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-01-12-national-institute-for-communicable-diseases-calls-for-vigilance-as-schools-reopen-amidst-measles-outbreak/>

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¹ <https://ewn.co.za/2022/12/30/measles-outbreak-in-sa-a-result-of-low-vaccine-coverage-nicd>

² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-01-09-measles-outbreaks-confirmed-in-five-provinces-with-test-positivity-rate-skyrocketing/>

³ <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/parents-frequently-asked-questions-measles>

⁴ <https://ewn.co.za/2022/12/30/measles-outbreak-in-sa-a-result-of-low-vaccine-coverage-nicd>

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/measles-outbreak-hits-four-provinces-and-threatens-health-children-across-south>

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/covid-pandemic-created-immunisation-gaps-in-africa-over-half-a-million-children-are-at-risk-190565>

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/measles-outbreak-hits-four-provinces-and-threatens-health-children-across-south>

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/covid-pandemic-created-immunisation-gaps-in-africa-over-half-a-million-children-are-at-risk-190565>

⁹ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-01-12-national-institute-for-communicable-diseases-calls-for-vigilance-as-schools-reopen-amidst-measles-outbreak/>