

Please, please Have your children immunized

Prevention is always the key

Manila Bulletin · 26 Feb 2019 · C1 · Prevention is always the key

What has caused the measles outbreak in Metro Manila? How is measles transmitted? —ever-break25@yahoo.com



The Philippines, not just the Metro Manila, National Capital Region (NCR), is in the midst of a measles epidemic or outbreak.

The ongoing outbreak evidently started last year in Mindanao, specifically in Zamboanga City and Davao.

It has since spread to other parts of the country. The Department of Health (DOH) has declared a measles outbreak in the NCR and Central Luzon, a declaration that, a few days later, was expanded to include Calabarzon, Western Visayas, and Central Visayas.

As of Feb. 11, the DOH's Epidemiology Bureau has recorded 5,615 confirmed measles cases nationwide or 190 percent higher than the figure for the same period the previous year. The number of deaths has also risen to 87 this year compared to eight during the same period last year. Clearly, we have a measles outbreak on our hands because as per World Health Organization (WHO) definition, a disease outbreak is the occurrence of cases of disease in excess of what would normally be expected in a defined community, geographical area, or season.

What is measles all about?

Measles is a viral disease that is transmitted by inhalation of airborne droplets from nasal or throat secretions of infected persons, direct contact with nasal or throat secretions or urine, and contact with articles freshly soiled with nasal or throat secretions.

The disease usually starts as fever eight to 13 days after entry of the virus into the body. The fever is typically accompanied by non-specific symptoms that include cough, sore throat, and runny nose. Sometimes redness of the eye and photophobia (sensitivity of the eyes to light) also occur. Three to seven days after the start of the illness, the blotchy red skin rashes that characterize measles emerge. The skin rashes first appear on the face then spread throughout the body in a matter of days.

There is no specific treatment for measles. In well-nourished children, the disease is rarely serious, subsiding spontaneously in one to two weeks. But in poorly nourished ones, measles often complicates. The more common serious, and sometimes fatal, complications of measles are pneumonia, diarrhea, and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

What caused the current outbreak?

Measles is a highly contagious disease, so contagious that 90-95 percent of people (WHO recommends 95 percent) must be vaccinated in order to protect the entire population, or achieve what is called herd immunity. In the Philippines, vaccinations are currently only at 55 percent according to UNICEF.

A sharp decline in the number of Filipino children being immunized with measles vaccine has occurred in the last few years from 88 percent in 2014 to 73 percent in 2017, and 40 percent last year. This has led to the accumulation of susceptible individuals, thus the outbreak.

There are many reasons for the decline in immunization coverage of Filipino children including lack of health personnel, inaccessibility of many children to health personnel, and lack of time among households to have their children immunized. But in so far as last year is concerned, when only 40 percent immunization coverage was achieved, a study conducted by the WHO in October in Metro Manila showed that the main reason for the low figure was parent's fear of vaccines brought about by the Dengvaxia issue.

The measles vaccine is safe and effective

The best way to prevent measles is by getting immunized with the measles vaccine. To prevent an outbreak, at least 95 percent of the population has to be immunized. Unlike Dengvaxia, which is a new vaccine, the measles vaccine has been extensively used for many years now and has been proven safe and effective.

In the regular routine immunization, two doses of measles vaccine are given to children. The first dose is given at the age of nine months, and the second dose is given at the age of 12 months.

Please, please have your children immunized

To stem the ongoing measles outbreak, the DOH, with the help of many other government agencies, is working double time in an effort to reach and immunize all children with the measles vaccine regardless of their immunization status. We appeal to all mothers to please, please have your children immunized. No one needs to get sick, much less die, from measles.

Note: Email inquiries on health matters to medical_notes2@yahoo.com