

Rubella is gone from the Americas: global health authorities

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Improved vaccine campaigns have led to the elimination of rubella—an infectious disease that can cause birth defects—from North, Central and South America, global health authorities said Wednesday.

The virus, sometimes known as German measles, was formally declared eradicated after five consecutive years without an endemic case of the virus in the region, said experts from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), World Health Organization (WHO) and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during a press conference in the US capital.

"Today I am privileged and delighted to announce that the Americas has become the world's first region to be declared free of endemic transmission of rubella virus which can cause serious birth defects in babies when contracted by women in early pregnancy," said Carissa Etienne, director of PAHO/WHO.

"This historic achievement culminates a 15-year elimination effort," she said.

The term "endemic" refers to a disease that is common or widespread in the population.

The last confirmed endemic cases of rubella were in 2009 in Argentina, and congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) in Brazil, said Cuauhtemoc Ruiz, chief of PAHO's immunization unit.

Rubella continues to spread in other parts of the world, with about 120,000 cases per year, particularly in Africa and southeast Asia, he said.

The next regions slated for elimination are the European region of the World Health Organization in 2015, followed by southeast Asia.

Rubella virus can cause a mild rash in children and adults, but when pregnant women are infected they risk stillbirth or having children with mental defects and physical deformities.

The Americas have previously eradicated smallpox in 1971 and polio in 1994.

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