

Mumps outbreak strikes Marshallese population in Arkansas

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An outbreak of mumps has hit a community of Marshall Islanders in northwest Arkansas particularly hard, according to health officials.

Marshallese people accounted for about 60 percent of the state's 2,220 reported cases as of Friday. The outbreak started in August, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported.

The contagious disease causes swelling in the salivary glands and cheeks, and is often transmitted when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

State health department director Nate Smith said he doesn't know why so many Marshallese people are infected. Officials are investigating if the vaccine is less effective for certain people. Smith noted that Marshallese people tend to live in close proximity.

"It's a little bit more like a college dorm in terms of intensity of exposure," he said. Smith added that Marshallese people participate in many community-oriented events, where it's easy for infections to spread.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Arkansas' outbreak is the largest since about 3,000 people were infected in New York City in 2009 and 2010. Smith said the state's mumps cases account for more than half of the cases reported nationwide this year.

The state health department has vaccinated almost 6,600 people as of

Friday. Smith said the efforts are working because only 12 cases were reported during the last three days of last week, "which is quite a bit less than we have had, really, for months."

The Marshall Islands are located in the Pacific Ocean, more than 2,000 miles southwest of Hawaii. Up to 12,000 Marshallese live in northwest Arkansas.

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