

Measles outbreak grows in L.A despite California's strict new vaccination law

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Six months after California's strict vaccine law took effect, a measles outbreak has infected 20 people, most of them in Los Angeles County, prompting a search for others who may have been exposed to the highly contagious virus.

Most of the patients live in western areas of the county, including L.A.'s Westside, the Santa Monica Mountains and the San Fernando Valley. Santa Barbara and Ventura counties each reported one case.

At least 15 of the 18 L.A. County patients either knew one another or had clear social connections, said Dr. Jeffrey Gunzenhauser, interim health officer for the L.A. County Department of Public Health. None of the 18 could provide proof of vaccination, he said.

Gunzenhauser said the first person was diagnosed in early December, followed by 16 cases in the last three weeks of 2016, and then one more case last week.

"I'm hopeful that we're getting to the end of this," he said.

Hershy Z. Ten, a rabbi who runs Jewish health care foundation Bikur Cholim in L.A.'s Beverly Grove neighborhood, said county health officials told him a [measles outbreak](#) was affecting the county's Orthodox Jewish community. He convened a panel last week to discuss what Jewish day schools and synagogues could do to stem the outbreak and ensure that unvaccinated children are immunized.

"Measles is very, very serious," he said. "Those children are at risk and they put other children at risk."

A measles outbreak that began at Disneyland in 2014 infected 145 people across the United States and dozens in Canada and Mexico. It led to the passage of a law in California requiring all children to be vaccinated unless doctors provide medical exemptions. The law took effect in July.

California is now one of three states that forbid children from opting out of vaccines because of religious or personal beliefs.

Health experts say the outbreak reveals the degree to which immunity against the disease has eroded - a problem the new law will probably improve but not completely fix.

"It really speaks to what we're so concerned about, which is parents making their decisions not to vaccinate their kids, and they can bring their kids into any setting and then contaminate everyone," said Dr. Robert Adler, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital Los Angeles.

Measles is one of the most contagious viruses in the world. If an infected person walks into a room, the virus can stay there for two hours after the person leaves. And it's dangerous - 15 people die every hour worldwide from measles, according to the World Health Organization.

To try to stop the spread of the virus in Southern California, L.A. County health workers spent the last several weeks chasing down people who might have been exposed. Infected people develop a rash that can take weeks to show up, but they can transmit the virus to others before that.

Gunzenhauser said county health workers interviewed each infected

person to find out everywhere they went during the four days before and after they developed rashes.

Then they tried to figure out who might have been at those locations. If someone went to an emergency room, for example, they asked the hospital for a list of patients there that day.

The county ultimately identified more than 2,000 people who may have come into contact with measles patients, and found that about 10 percent of them hadn't been vaccinated against the disease. Half of those who weren't protected were given a vaccination or other treatment to prevent them from getting measles, he said.

Gunzenhauser said the outbreak was contained to a group of people who shared a social circle, which made it easier to track down who might have come into contact with the virus.

"It is a little bit unusual, but it's fortunate," he said. "If this is a Disneyland thing or if this happened at Staples Center ... that would be problematic for us."

Though the state's new law makes vaccinations mandatory, schools are required only to check children's immunization statuses when they hit kindergarten or seventh grade. That means that a child who went unvaccinated upon entering kindergarten in fall 2015 because his parents opted out could have continued in first grade this past fall without vaccines.

Children are supposed to receive two vaccines to protect against measles before they start kindergarten.

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