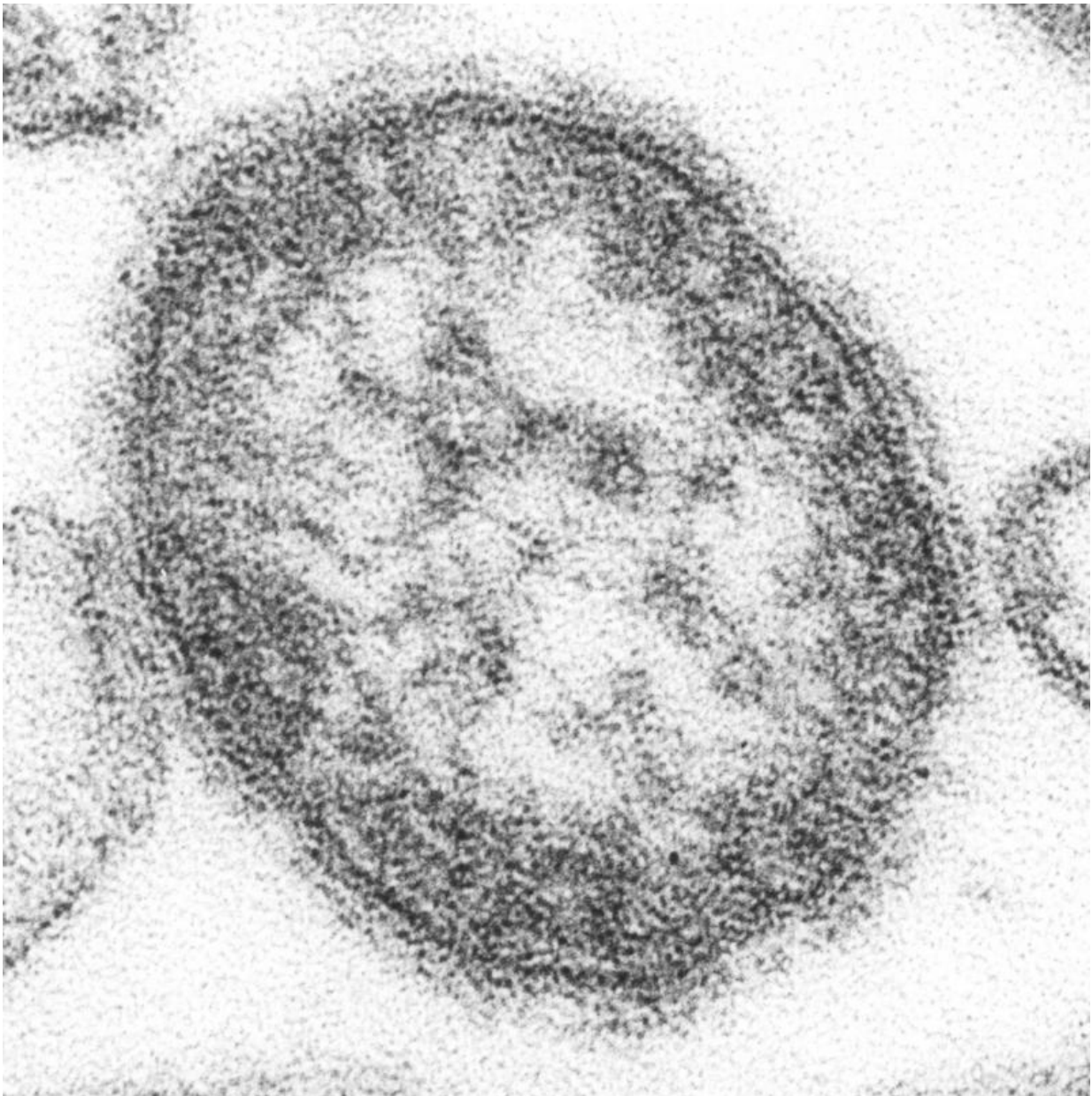


Tonga closes schools as measles epidemic spreads

November 14 2019



An electron micrograph of the measles virus. Credit: CDC/ Courtesy of Cynthia S. Goldsmith

All government primary schools and kindergartens in Tonga have been shut in an effort to limit the spread of measles sweeping through the South Pacific, the government announced Thursday.

With the number of confirmed and suspected measles infections in the Pacific kingdom nearing 200, Education Minister Siaso Sovaleni said schools would be closed until at least November 25.

"Children who happen to have measles during the closure will be able to be treated and stay isolated from others," he said.

A victory parade to celebrate Tonga's recent historic rugby league wins over Australia and Great Britain would go ahead Friday, but spectators have been advised to wear masks, and an opportunity for [school children](#) to meet the players has been cancelled.

In Samoa, where seven suspected measles-related deaths have been recorded, a measles epidemic has been declared and the government has taken steps to close all schools.

Neighbouring American Samoa announced a public health emergency Thursday and Governor Lolo Matalasi Moliga said everyone travelling from Tonga and Samoa to the US territory must provide proof of measles immunisation, as a condition of entry.

In the tourism-reliant Cook Islands, authorities said there were too many visitors to screen them all and preparations were under way to deal with

a potential outbreak.

"We are hoping we can hold," Health Secretary Josephine Aumea Herman told Radio New Zealand.

Measles is a highly infectious airborne disease that spreads easily through breathing, coughing, and sneezing. It typically causes a rash, fever and [white spots](#) in the mouth.

More serious complications include blindness, pneumonia, brain damage and severe dehydration.

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