

NEWS

## Three new measles cases in Cobb County



By Helena Oliviero and Ty Tagami

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Health authorities on Friday reported three new cases of measles in Cobb County, where multiple people have been quarantined since a middle schooler was diagnosed with the virus earlier this month.



The family may have spread measles to other people between Oct. 30-Nov. 13, according to the Georgia Department of Public Health, which is notifying individuals who may have been exposed to the virus and could be at increased risk for developing measles.

Authorities haven't established a direct connection to Mabry Middle School, where a student was recently diagnosed with measles. But an investigation into any possible link is ongoing and is considered highly likely, according to the state health agency.

"These additional cases of measles should be highly concerning for anyone who is not vaccinated with MMR," said health department commissioner Kathleen E. Toomey, referring to the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella. "Measles is a serious disease, one which can lead to dangerous complications, even death."



More and more parents are choosing not to vaccinate their children. Our kid reporter, Sammy, explains how this is putting unvaccinated children and vulnerable people who come in contact with them, like infants or grandparents, at greater risk.

Toomey, a medical doctor, said the measles vaccine is safe. And, she said, it's strongly recommended, both to protect the person vaccinated and vulnerable populations, such as infants, who are too young to be vaccinated.

Dr. Walter Orenstein, associate director of the Emory Vaccine Center and professor of medicine at the Emory University School of Medicine, said the three new cases are "very concerning" since it's unclear how the virus was introduced and is being spread here. It's possible there may be substantially more cases, he said.

In the United States, most measles cases are the result of international travel. The disease is brought here by people who get infected in other countries. Then, those travelers spread the disease to people who have not been vaccinated.

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The Georgia Department of Health is not aware of recent international travel for any of those diagnosed here.



All of those sickened with measles live relatively close to each other. The Mabry student attended school through Nov. 1 before being diagnosed.

Earlier this week, the health department announced that some students and at least one adult are being quarantined at home. Two people familiar with the situation put the number at 17. Those at home will not be allowed to return until a 21-day period is over, according to the state health agency.

The quarantine covers the time when symptoms of the disease would appear and an infected person would be contagious. That would be through Nov. 22. But, with schools closed the following week for Thanksgiving break, those exposed to the virus wouldn't return until Dec. 2 at the earliest.

So far this year, there have been 11 confirmed cases of measles in Georgia – more cases than in the previous decade combined.

State health officials are asking anyone with symptoms of measles to call a health-care provider first before going into a doctor's office or hospital.



Credit: Andrey Popov

Despite the worst measles outbreak in decades, few state legislatures this year have reconsidered the exemptions that families use to avoid inoculating their children. (Andrey Popov/Dreamstime/TNS)

The measles virus spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Droplets from the nose or mouth become airborne, or land on surfaces where germs can live for two hours. Measles is so contagious that, if one person has it, up to 90% of the people around him or her also will become infected if not vaccinated.

Stacy Smith, who was walking home with his daughter from Rocky Mount Elementary, just over a mile away from Mabry Middle, said the measles cases are worrisome because the virus is “in the neighborhoods” now — not only in schools.

His third grader has been vaccinated, and Smith said both he and his wife got booster shots seven or eight years ago.

“Everybody’s going to make their own choice on whether to have their kids vaccinated or not,” he said. “You’d hope folks that know they’re being exposed would take appropriate precautions.”

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“I’m going to go wash the hands and wipe down the counters,” he added.

Outside Mabry Middle, Tara Amos was waiting in a car pickup line.

She thinks Cobb schools did a good job communicating with parents about the infected student there, “clearly and in an un-alarming way.”

Her seventh grader was anxious at first, until Amos explained that her vaccination should keep her safe.

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“I felt like, in our case, we didn’t have anything to worry about,” Amos said.

In Georgia, vaccinations are mandatory for public school attendance, but there are two exemptions, one for medical reasons and another for religious reasons.

“Ultimately, I think it’s their choice, and I don’t think it’s my place to second guess that,” Amos said.

An estimated 93.6% of young children in Georgia received the recommended vaccination for measles, mumps and rubella, slightly lower than the national average of 94.7%, according to research published in an October issue of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Also in Georgia, 2.5 percent of kindergartners had an exemption from at least one vaccine, which is the same overall percentage for the U.S.

The CDC has recorded 1,261 cases of measles across 31 states in the U.S. since Jan. 1, the highest since 1992.

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Measles can be dangerous, especially for babies and young children, as well as pregnant women, the agency said.

About 1 in 5 unvaccinated people in the U.S. who get measles is hospitalized, according to the CDC. And as many as 1 out of every 20 children with measles gets pneumonia, the most common cause of death from measles in young children.



Ty Tagami



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