

WISCONSIN PUBLIC HEALTH COUNCIL

Assure safe and healthy people by monitoring progress on the state health plan, Healthiest Wisconsin 2020, and on the readiness for public health emergencies.



Wisconsin Public Health Council Statement Regarding Vaccination and Current Measles Outbreak

The Wisconsin Public Health Council was created by Act 186 [WI Statute 15.197(13)] to advise the Department of Health Services, the Governor, the Legislature, and the public on the progress in implementing the state's 10-year public health plan and the coordination of responses to public health emergencies.

This urgent statement is provided to the Department of Health Services, the Governor, and the Legislature to insure awareness of the Measles outbreaks currently occurring in the United States, the connection to the State Health Plan and potential for a public health emergency in our state due to under-vaccination for measles in Wisconsin.

The Public Health Council strongly advises, as per our charge, that state and public health action should be taken urgently to insure vaccination of every eligible person in the state except for those rare individuals with a valid medical exemption, to prevent measles-related illness, hospitalization, and death in Wisconsin.

Issue: Outbreak of Measles Cases in Unvaccinated Populations

Measles is highly contagious, spreading through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes, causing significant illnesses, including pneumonia and encephalitis. Measles was eliminated from the United States in 2000 due to good public health practices and through use of a safe and effective vaccine that has been the standard of measles prevention accepted by public health practitioners and physicians around the world. Our nation is currently experiencing the greatest number of reported cases of measles since 1994, and since measles was declared eliminated in 2000. Although no one in Wisconsin has become ill from measles yet during this outbreak, measles has been reported in three of our four bordering states, and it is likely that our first case is only weeks, if not days away.

Immunity and Vaccine Background

The MMR vaccine (measles, mumps and rubella) is very safe and effective. Because measles is so very contagious, studies have shown that 95% of the population needs to be immunized to prevent re-establishment of measles.

The spread of measles during this national outbreak has been closely linked to unvaccinated persons. Fraudulent and discredited misinformation linking the MMR vaccine to autism have resulted in tens of thousands of unnecessary measles cases and hundreds of deaths worldwide due to vaccine avoidance.

Vaccine Exemptions

All states require certain vaccines for school entry. Requirements have three major purposes beyond the goal of maintaining overall individual health. First, they assure that individual children do not contract disease in the social setting of school. Second, other students are protected from being at risk of disease and death from exposure to an individual student. Third, when vaccine coverage is high enough (called "herd immunity") the community is protected, including individuals who cannot receive vaccines or are immunocompromised.

This concept is important when one considers that, at any given time, there are millions of immunocompromised Americans who are highly susceptible to infectious diseases.

All states provide exemptions from vaccination for specific scientifically proven medical reasons. Exemptions also may be granted for religious or personal belief reasons. Medical exemptions are extremely rare, and most established religious orders support vaccination. Only 15 states allow personal exemptions from immunizations, including our state of Wisconsin. Recently, in response to this outbreak, California entirely repealed its non-medical exemptions, and Vermont removed personal belief exemptions from its legal code.

Recommendation

State and public health action should be taken urgently to insure vaccination of every eligible person in the state except for those rare individuals with a valid medical exemption, to prevent measles-related illness, hospitalization, and death in Wisconsin.