

Unvaccinated pupils face 21-day isolation as measles cases rise

Fears outbreak affecting up to 160,000 could occur in London alone as low uptake of MMR jobs increases risk of infection

By Laura Donnelly, HEALTH EDITOR and Alex Clark

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Unvaccinated children face being forced to self-isolate for 21 days because of a rapid rise in measles cases.

Councils issued warnings to parents after modelling suggested that up to 160,000 cases could occur in London alone. Health officials say low uptake of MMR jobs has increased the risk of the potentially deadly infection.

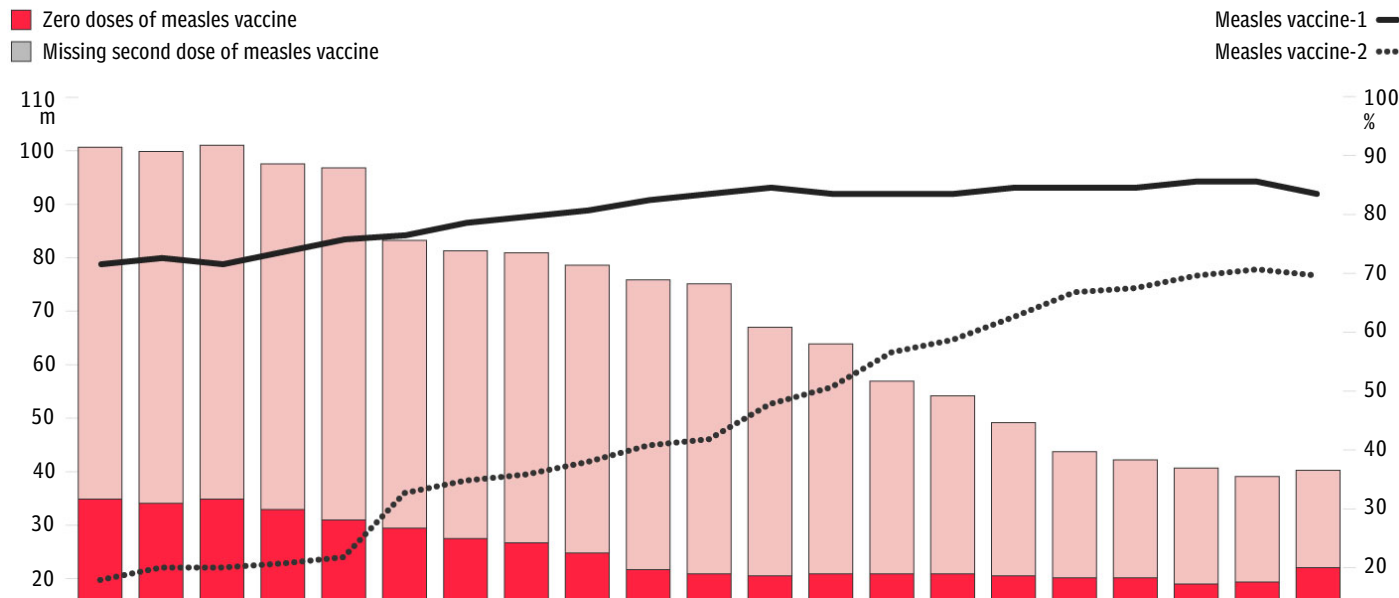
In letters from local authorities, parents in London and its surrounding counties were told that if a pupil is infected, classmates who have not had both doses of MMR could be sent home and asked to self-isolate for three weeks.

Uptake of the jobs fell significantly in the years following the discredited Andrew Wakefield study, which falsely linked them with autism in 1998.

It increased sharply after concerted efforts to persuade parents of the benefits of vaccination but has fallen again in recent years, with the programme set back during the Covid crisis.

Children at risk have already missed months of teaching during the pandemic because of school closures and being asked to self-isolate.

The numbers of children who missed a measles vaccine



The mass mail-out of letters warning parents that children could be asked to self-isolate for three weeks because of contact with a classmate with measles is thought to be unprecedented.

Figures from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) show that there were 128 cases of measles in the first half of this year compared with 54 in the whole of the last one, with 66 per cent of those detected in London.

Just 75 per cent of children in the capital have had both MMR jabs by the age of five, against a figure of 85 per cent across the country. The World Health Organisation recommends an uptake of 95 per cent to provide herd immunity and prevent outbreaks.

Barnet Council, in north London, wrote to parents warning that the capital could see tens of thousands of measles cases without improvements in vaccination rates, bringing a risk of hospitalisation and – in rare cases – death.

The letter, sent at the start of the school holidays, urged them to get their children vaccinated and said: “Any child identified as a close contact of a measles case without satisfactory vaccination status may be asked to self-isolate for up to 21 days. Children who are vaccinated do not need to be excluded from school or childcare.”

The latest published quarterly figures show that just 72.1 per cent of five-year-olds in the borough have had both MMR jabs.

A similar letter from neighbouring Haringey Council, sent last week, warned of an increase in measles circulating and said children without both MMR doses might be asked to isolate for 21 days. The area has an uptake of 67.9 per cent for both doses of the vaccine by the age of five, according to the data.

Meanwhile, at the start of the summer, Hertfordshire County Council sent a letter to parents that said: “Did you know that if your child is identified as a close contact to a measles case and they do not have satisfactory vaccination status, they may be asked to self-isolate for up to 21 days?”

“Children who are fully vaccinated do not need to be excluded from school or childcare. Vaccination can help keep your child in school.”

Several councils said they had sent the letters to parents at all schools in their area based on national guidance from UKHSA. But the agency said the guidance, issued by predecessor Public Health England, suggested head teachers might wish to consider “excluding” unvaccinated pupils exposed to cases of measles but did not go as far as telling them to self-isolate.

Why are councils sending letters to parents?

Officials have been concerned about low uptake of MMR vaccinations for several years.

Although the World Health Organisation declared in 2017 that Britain had “eliminated” measles, uptake of jabs was already falling and took a further knock during the pandemic, especially among toddlers.

Measles, one of the most infectious diseases, remains potentially deadly. Officials want to persuade parents to get their children vaccinated, and hope the threat of children being kept home for three weeks may convince those who remain reluctant.

Why self-isolate for up to 21 days?

Without vaccination, one measles case can spread to nine others. Guidance in the US, Canada and Australia suggests a period of around three weeks of “exclusion” from settings with outbreaks.

Guidance in the UK runs along similar lines, saying head teachers may wish to consider “excluding” unvaccinated pupils. Councils in London and surrounding areas appear to have gone further, telling parents that unvaccinated children exposed to measles could be asked to self-isolate for up to 21 days.

Why is measles spreading?

MMR uptake has worsened since Covid after school closures, the diversion of vaccinators to administer Covid jabs and increased “anti-vaxx” sentiment.

UKHSA modelling, drawn up in July, suggests that London could see between 40,000 and 160,000 measles cases without improvements in uptake.

Its risk assessment suggests the two cohorts hardest hit by an outbreak would be likely to be those aged 18 to 24 – the generation that missed jabs following the Wakefield scandal – with the next most affected group children under four, who missed vaccines during the pandemic.

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The National Measles Guidelines, published in 2019, say that susceptible contacts of someone who has it, such as unvaccinated siblings, should be advised to “self-exclude” from school during the incubation period, which can be up to 21 days.

The guidelines add that head teachers “may wish to consider excluding unvaccinated pupils who have been exposed because of the risk to other students”.

The MMR vaccine is 99 per cent effective after two doses, meaning children who had been vaccinated could still be at risk if an outbreak spread in a large school. The first dose, normally given around a child’s first birthday, gives protection of around 95 per cent.

Measles is one of the most contagious of all infectious diseases, with around nine in 10 unvaccinated people likely to develop it after close contact with a case.

Children under five, pregnant women and those with compromised immune systems are at highest risk of severe illness and complications. In the worst cases, it can cause acute encephalitis, leading to brain damage as well as respiratory problems, both of which can be fatal.

Dr Vanessa Saliba, a consultant epidemiologist at UKHSA, said: “When there are measles cases or outbreaks in nurseries or schools, the UKHSA health protection team will assess the situation, together with the school and other local partners, and provide advice for staff and pupils.

“Those who are not up to date with their MMR vaccinations will be asked to catch up urgently to help stop the outbreak and minimise disruption in schools.”

Paul Hunter, a professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia, said: “If a child is infected and there is a child in their class who isn’t immunised, there is a really high chance that the child will catch it and spread it to other unimmunised children. For children, measles is far more lethal than Covid ever was.”

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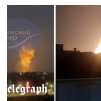
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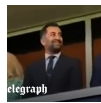
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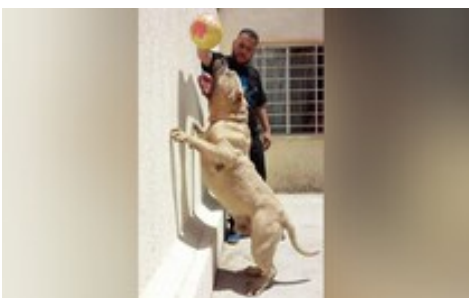
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