

PRINT-Stopping a preventable outbreak: Vaccination is key to ending a resurgence of measles

The third week of March marked a regrettable milestone. The number of measles cases soared past the number in all of 2024. Dana DeShon, APRN for Peoria, Illinois-based OSF HealthCare, says globally the mortality rate of children worldwide has been reduced by 51% by just the act of vaccinating them. Vaccines save more than 4-5 million lives each year and have prevented approximately 50 million deaths between 2000-2019.

However, DeShon worries that in the United States, vaccine hesitancy will bring measles back as a public health crisis. The advanced practice registered nurse has been involved with the United Nations Foundation initiative called [Shot@Life](#) through which she and others lobby Congress to fund vaccine support for children in low-income countries. According to DeShon, the funding accounts for less than 1% of the total U.S. budget but saves 2.5 million lives every year worldwide.

However, these days, she's focused on vaccinations at home.

DeShon says most of the population hasn't seen the devastating impact of the highly contagious measles because it was eradicated in 2000. But measles is making a resurgence because of vaccine hesitancy. And measles is the most contagious of all vaccine-preventable diseases.

It begins with a runny nose, watery eyes and then a rash so people can be walking around, spreading the airborne virus before severe symptoms develop.

"You're contagious four days before that rash and up to four days after so we could have 8 to 10 days of people walking around not even knowing they have measles and then they're just spreading it around to people at risk. Obviously, the people most at risk, are the people who are not vaccinated," DeShon points out.

That includes babies who can't be vaccinated until age 1, along with pregnant women and immunocompromised cancer patients who can't get vaccinated.

Vaccine hesitancy was fueled in the 1990s by a bad study from a physician who has since lost his license to practice medicine. The research, published in a respected medical journal, *The Lancet*, involved only 12 patients and falsely linked vaccines with autism. DeShon said the study has been retracted and there is, in fact, NO scientific evidence that vaccines cause autism.

She emphasizes the National Institutes of Health (NIH) spent millions on research.

"Outside research was also done and there were no links that they could find from that original *Lancet* study. It got to the point that they said, 'We're not going to do anymore studies because they did not see a link between autism and the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine.'"

Measles vaccination rates are falling

The Kaiser Family Foundation says measles vaccination rates in most U.S. states [have fallen](#) below the 95% threshold scientists consider necessary for so called 'herd immunity' to control the disease, and those rates have continued to drop. That's concerning for DeShon.

“How are we going to stop this? It is not vitamin A. Vitamin A is not going to stop the measles outbreak. We need vaccinations. That is what is going to stop the outbreak that we are seeing, not just in west Texas, but all over in these pockets we’re seeing in the United States right now.”

DeShon stresses when the population is vaccinated, measles goes away. Receiving one and two doses of measles vaccine is 93% and 97% effective, respectively, in preventing measles.

She points to an outbreak at a Chicago migrant shelter last year. Fifty-seven measles cases were associated with people in the shelter. Most cases occurred in people who were unvaccinated. A prompt and coordinated response with a mass vaccination campaign reduced the size and duration of the outbreak and stopped what might have become a statewide public health concern.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says measles can lead to severe complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), and in some cases, death. Children, especially those younger than 5 years old, are at a higher risk of developing serious complications from measles.

A school-age child in Texas died from the measles and the New Mexico Department of Health is reporting the death of an unvaccinated adult who tested positive for measles. Even if a child survives measles, it can have long-lasting effects.

A condition called [subacute sclerosing panencephalitis, or SSPE](#), a degenerative neurological condition can develop seven to 10 years after a measles infection, according to DeShon.

The disease carries a heavy toll. So DeShon reminds everyone that while vaccination is a personal decision, it impacts health systems, communities, and the most vulnerable among us.

“When it comes to the point that this is something that is so contagious, and now deadly, then we really need to stop and think, ‘We need to be doing this, not because of me but because of those around me.’”

If you’re unsure whether you have immunity against measles, talk to your health care provider about your options.