

Thanks to high vaccine rate, there are no measles in the Riverbend

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So far the St. Louis region and the Riverbend has not seen any cases of the measles. Dr. Kathie Wuellner, a long-time local pediatrician at Pediatric Healthcare Unlimited in Alton, states: "Fortunately, the general population in this (Riverbend) area is very good at having its immunizations updated and because of that we haven't seen any cases of measles lately."

Yet, the recent outbreak in other parts of the nation should induce caution on behalf of parents and physicians

Before the measles vaccine, there were over 500,000 cases of the disease in the United States each year. In 2002, Rubeola, as it is also known, was considered eradicated in the country. However there has been a gradual incline in measles cases for the past seven years, approximately; last year there were 644 cases of measles in the US.

Dr. Wuellner recalls a measles outbreak in 1990. "Because of religious objections, there were several people who were not vaccinated and this led to a local outbreak at Principia. Unfortunately there were several deaths related to that. At that time, most of the fatalities were adults."

In recent years, most of the cases of measles are associated with what the CDC calls "import-associated outbreak(s)." This means that unvaccinated travelers bring back the disease from abroad and it is spread locally.

For example, an outbreak in San Diego in 2008 apparently stemmed from an unvaccinated 7-year-old who traveled to Europe. This caused 11 others to contract the disease, all of whom were children under the age of one who were yet too young to get the vaccine

The vaccine is typically given to a child in two doses - one at his or her first birthday and the other at Kindergarten age. It is highly effective and typically affords lifetime immunity.

People who don't vaccinate not only put their own children at risk but also others in the community. Those most vulnerable are infants who are too young for the vaccine, and others with a compromised immune system from organ transplants, cancer or other conditions.

Dr. Wuellner reports that the largest benefit from vaccines is herd immunity. "Patients with a poor immune system, despite perhaps having had the vaccine, are still susceptible to getting measles and other diseases." This underscores the importance of widespread vaccination, she says.

Measles is highly contagious. It is airborne, meaning it can spread by coughing or sneezing, and it can live on a surface for up to two hours. Unlike many diseases, it can spread even before symptoms begin.

Symptoms include high fever, sometimes up to 104 degrees, cough, runny nose and red eyes. White spots develop in the mouth and a red, flat rash starts on the face then spreads to the rest of the body. Symptoms usually start 10-12 days after exposure and can last over a week.

Complications can be severe and include blindness, diarrhea, pneumonia, and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). Dr. Wuellner states that "pneumonia is likely the worst complication but encephalitis and sepsis are also devastating."

"What helps around here is there is a high rate of vaccination," says Wuellner. As vigilant community members, the onus falls upon us to keep up the good rate.