

Public urged to heighten vigilance against measles

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (March 1) reminded members of the public to stay vigilant amid the recent increase in measles cases globally and stressed that vaccination is the most effective way to prevent measles.

"Globally, many countries worldwide, including some countries in Europe, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, are facing a resurgence of measles due to a backslide in vaccination coverage rates after the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 58 000 people in Europe and Central Asia infected with measles in 2023. A similar upward trend was observed in our neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Malaysia, where measles remains endemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of measles cases had risen worldwide with 168 countries reporting over 300 000 cases in 2023, a roughly 79 per cent increase from 2022." a spokesman for the CHP said.

The spokesman pointed out that in September 2016, the WHO confirmed that Hong Kong has achieved the interruption of endemic measles virus transmission in the presence of a well-performing surveillance system and high level of population vaccination and immunity. While the vaccination coverage of two doses of measles-containing vaccines in the local population were all along maintaining at over 95 per cent, Hong Kong being an international city with a high volume of international travel has been facing the risk of measles virus importation and the potential risk of a further spread in the local community.

The spokesman added, "People born in Hong Kong before 1967 are considered to have acquired immunity to measles through natural infection, while those born after 1967 should have been protected from measles through a comprehensive territory-wide childhood vaccination programme. For a small proportion of local-born citizens who did not receive two doses of measles vaccine before, they could seek advice from doctor on measles vaccination." The spokesman further commented, "In view of the measles vaccination coverage overseas, new immigrants, foreign workers and students who have not had two doses of measles vaccination in their home country should consult their family doctors and complete their measles vaccination in Hong Kong promptly."

In view of the recent increase in measles activity globally and the risk of importation, the CHP has issued letters to alert doctors and private hospitals to inform them of the latest measles situation, remind them to stay vigilant and report any suspected cases. Moreover, letters to employment agencies for foreign domestic helpers, airport/vessel community/cruise ship agents, and universities were delivered to advise them to encourage combined measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination among foreign domestic helpers, workers of border control points, and university staff or students respectively.

MMR vaccination is available in most private health clinics in Hong Kong. Parents are reminded to maintain up-to-date immunisation for their children according to the Hong Kong Childhood Immunisation Programme for timely and comprehensive protection.

Measles is a highly infectious disease caused by the measles virus. It can be transmitted by airborne droplets or direct contact with nasal or throat secretions of infected persons, and, less commonly, by articles soiled with nose and throat secretions. A patient can pass the disease to other persons from four days before to four days after the appearance of a skin rash.

The spokesman advised, "The incubation period (the period from infection to appearance of illness) of measles ranges from seven days to 21 days. Symptoms of measles include fever, skin rash, cough, runny nose and red eyes. If symptoms arise, members of the public should wear surgical masks, stop going to work or school and avoid going to crowded places. They should also avoid contact persons with weakened immunity, pregnant women and children aged below 1. Those suspected to have been infected are advised to seek medical attention as early as possible and reveal relevant contact history of measles to healthcare professionals."

Besides being vaccinated against measles, members of the public should take the following measures to prevent infection:

- Maintain good personal and environmental hygiene;
- Maintain good indoor ventilation;
- Keep hands clean and wash hands properly;
- Wash hands when they are dirtied by respiratory secretions, such as after sneezing;
- Cover the nose and mouth while sneezing or coughing and dispose of nasal and mouth discharge properly;
- Clean used toys and furniture properly; and
- Persons with measles should be kept out of school until four days from the appearance of a rash to prevent the spread of the infection to non-immune persons in school.

For more information on measles, the public may visit the CHP's [measles thematic page](#). Members of the public who are going to travel can visit the website of the DH's [Travel Health Service](#) for news of measles outbreaks outside Hong Kong.