

WHO confirms Hong Kong's interruption of endemic rubella virus transmission

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Verification Commission for Measles and Rubella Elimination in the Western Pacific (RVC) today (May 21) confirmed that Hong Kong has achieved the interruption of endemic rubella virus transmission.

Welcoming the WHO's verification that Hong Kong has achieved rubella-free status, the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan said, "The success is encouraging, but there is no room for complacency. We will remain vigilant and will continue to work on closing immunity gaps in the population".

The WHO considers a country/area to have eliminated rubella when there is no evidence of endemic transmission of the virus for at least 36 months, and a well-performing surveillance system is in place.

A spokesman for the Department of Health said that Hong Kong maintains a high-quality case-based surveillance system, with effective epidemiological and laboratory surveillance that allows rapid response to cases and outbreaks.

Rubella was once endemic in Hong Kong with occasional peaks observed in the early years. Rubella vaccination was introduced in 1978, following an epidemic in 1977 and the subsequent increase in congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) cases. With the introduction of the trivalent measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) immunisation for all one-year-old children since 1990, and a two-dose regime in 1996, there has been a substantial reduction in rubella cases. The two-dose MMR schedule was well established with high coverage achieved.

The National Verification Committee for Measles and Rubella Elimination in Hong Kong (NVC) was established in 2012 to monitor the progress towards measles and rubella elimination. Sustaining the elimination status remains an ongoing challenge, as sporadic cases and clusters will continue to occur from time to time until global eradication is achieved. In the current era of frequent international travel and population movement, pockets of unvaccinated individuals vulnerable to rubella may exist and the potential for outbreaks following imported cases will continue. This underscores the importance of timely vaccinations for susceptible populations including young children, travellers, migrants and foreign domestic helpers who have not been fully vaccinated, the spokesman said.

Vaccination is the most effective measure to prevent rubella infection. Members of the public are reminded to undertake immunisation to protect themselves, their children, the family and the community from rubella. Women of childbearing age who are not immunised should check their immunity status before pregnancy and receive a rubella vaccine as required.

In the Western Pacific, Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Macao, New Zealand and Korea also achieved rubella-free status.

For more information on rubella, the public may visit the CHP's thematic webpage of rubella (www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/101027.html).