

# Measles: Frequently asked questions

For the latest update on the measles outbreak in Fiji, please refer to the 'Press Release' section on the Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services website's ([www.health.gov.fj](http://www.health.gov.fj)) Media Center.

## What is measles?

Measles is a highly infectious airborne viral disease that spreads easily through the air through breathing, coughing, and sneezing. You are at risk of getting measles if you breathe the same air as someone with the disease and you are not immune. You are not immune if you have not been vaccinated, or you have never had the disease.

## What are the symptoms of measles?

Measles symptoms include fever and a rash with any of the following: runny nose, sneezing, cough, red/watery eyes, white spots inside the mouth (Koplik spots). The rash starts after the other symptoms and spreads from the hairline and behind the ears to all over the body. The rash is red, flat or slightly raised, and doesn't blister. It is typically not itchy.

Most people recover from a measles infection in 8-10 days with rest and ensuring that they are eating and drinking to avoid dehydration. However, some people develop serious complications of the disease.

## Measles complications

Measles is a serious disease because it can lead to severe complications and death in some people. Some complications include:

- pneumonia (infection of the lungs);
- swelling of the brain (encephalitis), which can cause a brain injury;
- infection of the middle ear;
- severe diarrhea;
- adverse effects on pregnant women and their babies.

Children under the age of five, pregnant women, adults between 19-39 years and those with compromised immune systems are most at risk of complications.

## What is the treatment for measles?

There is no specific antiviral treatment for measles, as it is your body's immune system that fights off the disease. Most people recover from a measles infection in 8-10 days with rest and ensuring that they are eating and drinking to avoid dehydration. However, those that develop complications need admission to hospital and specialized treatment.



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## What do I do if I think I have measles?

If you develop the symptoms of measles please call one of the following numbers. These numbers are only to be used for people who think they, or a family member has the measles. If you need to see a doctor please call the facility before you arrive so they can ensure you do not infect other patients.

- Central 2219905
- Eastern 2219906
- Western 2219907
- Northern 2219908

## How can you catch measles?

You are at risk of getting measles if you breathe the same air as someone with the disease and you are not immune. Measles is spread:

- when an infected person coughs or sneezes, and you breathe it in;
- by direct contact with fluid from a person's coughs or sneezes;
- when you touch something that has the measles virus on it, then touch your own nose or mouth.

Measles virus can remain in the air for up to two hours after an infected person leaves an area. Measles spreads easily through families, workplaces, childcare centres and schools. **Anyone who is not immune is at risk of getting measles.**

## How do you prevent catching measles?

You are best protected if you have received two doses of the measles vaccine, or have had measles in the past.

A safe and effective vaccine exists for measles. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services provides measles vaccine free to children. Most Fijians are already protected against measles because of our effective immunisation program.

Please check if your children have received at least 2 doses of the measles vaccine according to the Fiji immunisation schedule. This information should be in your child's 'Fiji Child Health Record' (the booklet/card every child born in Fiji is provided) for children under the age of 5, and the school health card for school aged children.

Fijians born before the 1980s, when the measles vaccine was first introduced, are generally considered immune as measles used to be a very common childhood illness.



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## **How is immunisation being used to stop the outbreak?**

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services is conducting an immunisation campaign targeting people who may not be fully immunised and are most at risk of measles infection. Already close to 100,000 people around the country have been vaccinated in phase one of the campaign. This includes over 18,000 people in the outbreak area of Serua/Namosi.

The second phase of this immunisation campaign will begin in the first week of December.

Across Fiji it will target people in the groups listed below:

- Any child in Fiji who has not received 2 doses of a measles vaccine;
- Any child in Fiji aged 12 and 18 months who is due their routine measles immunisation;
- Any person in Fiji travelling overseas, however evidence of travel must be provided i.e. travel itinerary or ticket;
- All health care workers in Fiji;
- All airport and hotel staff.

**In Central Division only**, the campaign will also target:

- All children aged 6 months to 5 years;
- All people born between 1980 and 2000 (19 to 39 year olds);
- All residents of Serua/Namosi aged 6 months and older.

## **Why are these groups being targeted?**

We have determined the target groups based on the location of the outbreak in Fiji, the age groups most affected and most at risk of catching measles and developing complications, and also through an analysis of our historical immunisation coverage.

Central Division is prioritised for this phase of the campaign as all confirmed cases to date are in this division, and the focus remains on containing the current outbreak. The other divisions will be targeted once more vaccine supplies are received.

Because there are outbreaks in neighbouring countries, people travelling overseas with proof of travel can also receive the vaccine. They should get the measles vaccine at least 14 days before departure. This will reduce their risk of catching measles while abroad and then bringing it back to Fiji.



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## **Why am I being turned away/denied vaccination in an outbreak? I want the vaccine, so why can't I get it?**

In order to control this outbreak, it is important that we protect those at the highest risk of catching and spreading the disease first. This will help protect everyone else, especially those that cannot be immunised e.g. babies under the age of 6 months and pregnant women.

There has been a huge demand for the measles vaccine in Fiji. We are pleased to see that life-saving vaccines are so widely accepted by our population.

More stock is on the way to Fiji, but current stocks are running low so we have needed to focus on those people most at risk of catching and spreading measles.

## **Should I be worried if I am not one of these target groups?**

Fiji has a measles vaccine coverage rate of 94% based on the 2018 WHO/UNICEF joint reporting process that takes into account the results of administrative data and periodic vaccination coverage surveys. We also conducted a mass measles immunisation campaign in 2017 for all 1-10 year olds that achieved 95% coverage.

We have good coverage of measles immunisation in Fiji. This good coverage in turn helps to protect the rest of our people, through herd immunity.

## **Are there any people who should not be immunised against measles?**

Most people can be immunised against measles without any problems. However, some people should not receive the vaccine. These include:

- Infants under the age of 6 months;
- Pregnant women;
- People with severely weakened immune systems caused by medical conditions or those receiving high dose immunosuppressive therapy such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or oral corticosteroids;
- People who have had a severe allergic reaction after a previous dose of vaccine.

## **I am not a Fijian citizen, but I am in the target group. Can I still receive the vaccine?**

Yes, regardless of nationality, anyone in Fiji who is part of a target group is eligible for the vaccine.



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## **Who in Fiji is already likely to be immune?**

People born before 1980 are likely to have had a measles infection and therefore have life-long immunity.

Since 2003, children in Fiji have been receiving two doses of a measles vaccine routinely through the immunisation programme (at 12 months and school entry). Our schedule has now shifted to 12 months for the first dose and 18 months for the second dose.

People born between 1980 and 2000 (aged 19-39) are likely to have had only one dose of measles vaccine so this group may not be adequately protected against measles.

## **I am certain I have had two doses of a measles vaccine. Do I need another?**

No you do not. Two doses of a measles vaccine offers the best protection against measles.

## **Is the measles vaccine safe?**

The measles vaccine is safe and effective in preventing measles. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects but these are usually minor and temporary, such as a sore arm or mild fever. More serious side effects are possible, but extremely rare. Getting the measles vaccine is much safer than getting measles. The most common side effects of the measles vaccine are:

- Minor pain (from the injection) and/or reaction (swelling, redness);
- Fever;
- Mild rash.

You can help alleviate the pain for your child with paracetamol and a warm compress.

## **I know pregnant women can't be immunised, but what can I do to protect myself and my baby?**

Pregnant women who have not had two doses of a measles vaccine are strongly encouraged to have the vaccine as soon as possible after delivery.

If an outbreak is ongoing when their babies are 6 months old, these babies should receive a 'zero' dose of measles vaccine, followed by the two routine doses according to the national immunisation schedule.



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## **I am not part of the target group for vaccinations. What else can I do to reduce my risk of catching measles?**

Measles is very contagious. To help stop the spread of the disease, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services also advises Fijians to take the following precautions:

- Avoid non-essential travel to Serua/Namosi. If you need to travel to Serua/Namosi, please get vaccinated against measles at least two weeks before travel. Please avoid taking those that cannot get vaccinated (e.g. babies under the age of 6 months and pregnant women) to the outbreak area of Serua/Namosi.
- Avoid holding or attending large gatherings of people, especially in Central Division, but also those that bring participants from across the country or overseas (such as youth camps, religious gatherings, graduation ceremonies, sporting events, etc). Measles can spread very easily among large groups of people if they are not immune, who can then take the disease back into their communities.
- If you are holding an event with international visitors, or participants from an outbreak area, please strongly encourage them to get vaccinated against measles at least two weeks before travel. This especially applies to visitors traveling from other countries with measles outbreaks i.e. New Zealand, Samoa and Tonga.

## **What can employers / general public do?**

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services is urging employers to provide their support to the control of this outbreak by not penalizing employees that are placed under quarantine and subsequently are unable to work.

Quarantine is needed to protect others from getting the disease, and employees must be allowed to comply with quarantine without fear for loss of income or employment. Those under quarantine will be provided with the appropriate medical certification.

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