

Q&A – North West

Top lines

- Measles is a **preventable disease** that can cause serious illness leading to complications especially babies, pregnant women, and people with weakened immunity.
- Around 1 in 10 children will get a complication like an ear infection, chest infection or inflammation of the brain, and some of these will lead to a long-term disability and on rare occasions death.
- Children under the age of 10 years, young adults (the “Wakefield cohorts” 19–25-year-olds) and communities with low vaccine coverage are the most at risk.
- MMR vaccination coverage across England has **'fallen to the lowest level in a decade'**. In England coverage of 2 MMR doses at age 5 years is around 85%, with about **10% of children in the country left unprotected from measles by the time they are ready to start school**. WHO's recommended target is 95% coverage - to eliminate spread and prevent such outbreaks.
- Measles spreads very easily among those who are unvaccinated, especially in nurseries and schools.

NW focus

- We are warning people to make sure their vaccinations are up to date and be alert for measles after we are now starting to see clusters of confirmed measles cases in the North West region.
- Data published today by the UK Health Security Agency shows **24** cases of measles have been reported in the North West between 1 October 2023 and 13 February 2024. This is an increase of **14** cases on data published last week. The majority of cases are in Greater Manchester.
- We are working with partners in local authority public health teams and the NHS to monitor the situation, provide advice and support local communities to be aware of action they can take to protect themselves, including getting vaccinated.
- Measles can be a serious infection that can lead to complications especially in young children and those with weakened immune systems.
- MMR vaccine coverage has been falling for the last decade with 1 out of 10 children starting school in England not protected and so there is a real risk that this outbreak could spread more widely across the North West.
- Parents should be aware that measles is a nasty illness for most children and sadly, for some, can be very serious and life changing, but it is completely preventable. Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself and your children.
- I strongly urge parents to take up the offer as soon as possible and protect their child now.
- It is also important to be aware of what symptoms to look out for, as the measles virus is highly infectious.
- Parents can check their children's red book to see if they are up to date or if you're not sure anyone can call their GP practice to check.
- We expect to see measles to continue to circulate in the North West in the coming weeks. Uptake of MMR in parts of the region is lower than the 95% needed to protect the population, which is giving this serious disease a chance to get a foothold in communities.

Latest data

We are now publishing lab confirmed measles cases for the current outbreak on a weekly basis (first published on 30 Jan 2024) at national and regional level, starting from 01 October 2023 to present: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/measles-epidemiology-2023/national-measles-standard-incident-measles-epidemiology-from-october-2023>

See weekly rolling news story - Latest measles statistics published:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/latest-measles-statistics-published>

Is vaccine hesitancy / misinformation/anti-vaxxers social media content the primary cause? / Are we still seeing the result of the Wakefield impact from 1998?

- There is much focus in the media on misinformation and vaccine hesitancy. But, although we shouldn't be complacent about this, it is not driving the long term decline we have seen.
- Our annual survey of attitudes to vaccines among parents shows high confidence in the childhood & adolescent NHS vaccine programmes, which shows confidence has actually improved over the period when coverage was declining.
- Our latest survey shows almost 90% of parents understand the benefits of vaccination for their children and trust the NHE imms programmes.
- Parents largely trust the advice they get from practice nurses, general practitioners, pharmacists and from the NHS, and rank this far more trustworthy than the internet and social media.
- The declining rates are more likely a combination of some people being complacent about the risk of some diseases, such as measles and polio, but also about people's lifestyles and finding the time to ensure your baby or child attends their appointment.
- For some parents working during the daytime, attending GP appointments can be challenging.

Partner quotes

Dr Linda Charles-Ozuzu, Regional Director of Commissioning at NHS England in the North West said:

"The MMR vaccine is the best way we can protect children from measles, which is highly contagious and can be very dangerous in some cases.

"Last week, thousands of North West school-aged children, who are yet to have one or both of the MMR vaccines, started to receive invitations from the NHS to book a catch-up appointment.

"The recent rise in cases is worrying, but measles is a preventable disease, and two doses of the vaccine is enough to give lifelong protection from measles, mumps and rubella, so please take up the offer of vaccination if your child has yet to have one, or both of the vaccines."