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|  | News Release |

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01HRS THURSDAY 29 AUGUST 2024

UKHSA warns West Midlands families of back to school measles surge

* [around **15%**](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/cover-of-vaccination-evaluated-rapidly-cover-programme-2023-to-2024-quarterly-data) **children in the West Midlands** region are not fully protected from childhood infections including measles by their 5th birthday
* the region has [**second highest**](https://ukhsa-dashboard.data.gov.uk/topics/measles) number of cases of measles in 2024 – with around **24% of cases being in the West Midlands**

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) is today (29 August) issuing an urgent call to parents to ensure their children catch up on missed vaccinations before they head to the classroom, as the Agency scales up the [Childhood Immunisation Marketing Campaign](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/marketing-campaign-launches-to-drive-up-childhood-vaccinations) across England amid fears of a further surge in measles cases as the new term begins.

This campaign[[1]](#footnote-1), being delivered by UKHSA, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and NHS England, will remind parents and carers of the risk of their children missing out on protection against serious diseases, including measles, whooping cough, meningitis, diphtheria and polio.

Since autumn 2023 there have been a number of major measles outbreaks in the West Midlands, North West and London with sporadic cases across the country – resulting in the [highest number of cases](https://ukhsa-dashboard.data.gov.uk/topics/measles) in England since 2012.

This prompted the launch of wide ranging [MMR catch-up activities](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/01/nhs-launches-catch-up-campaign-for-missed-mmr-vaccines/) targeting communities with low uptake led by NHS and other partners between August 23-April 24, for children who missed MMR vaccines.

An MMR Evaluation Report published today by UKHSA assesses the impact of the catch up activity. This shows that parents are coming forward and there has been a significant increase in MMR uptake, particularly among deprived and ethnic communities. The report shows between August 23 – April 24:

* The NHS has delivered 180,000 additional doses, with over 51,000 of these given to children aged 5 or under
* over 13% of previously unvaccinated children aged 5 years or under were vaccinated with MMR1 during the campaign period compared to baseline
* a 4.9% increase in uptake of MMR2 in Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African children aged between 3 years 7 months and 5 years.

However, MMR uptake rates are still too low in some areas in England and there is still potential to see outbreaks, particularly as children start mixing more on starting or returning to school.

Measles spreads very easily among those who are unvaccinated, especially in nurseries and schools. It can be a very nasty illness and, in some children, can be very serious, leading to hospitalisation and life-long complications and tragically even death in rare cases. Getting vaccinated not only gives children protection but it also helps to prevent the spread of the disease and protect those more vulnerable.

**Emma Booth, Consultant in Health Protection with UKHSA West Midlands, leading on vaccine preventable diseases, said:** “As a mum and health protection consultant, it is especially tragic to see kids suffering when these diseases are so easily preventable.

“Two MMR jabs offer the best and safest protection against measles, but if unvaccinated children are at risk of serious illness or life-long complications. No parent wants this for their child.

“It is encouraging that parents, whose children have missed vaccines are now coming forward, but we are a long way from ensuring all are protected and safe – with around 15% of 5 year-olds not fully protected from measles and a range of childhood infections before starting full-time school in the West Midlands. Importantly vaccination is also about not spreading the disease to others who may be more vulnerable.

“Measles is highly infectious and is still circulating in many areas across the country. In the West Midlands, we started seeing a rise in cases from last October. While we’ve seen a reduction in rates this last few months, we still have the second highest number of measles cases across the country for 2024. It only takes one case to get into a school or nursery where many children are unprotected for numbers to suddenly surge.

“Our campaign will be visible across multi-media channels and sees children urging their parents to get them protected.

“Parents should check their child’s vaccinations Red Book to ensure they are up to date with MMR and all their vaccines. If unsure, contact your GP practice, who can check and provide the vaccinations your child needs. Don’t put it off, please act today.”

The campaign will share the urgent message that “if children aren’t vaccinated, they’re not protected” with parents across the country for the next six weeks. This will go live as the new early years settings and school term begins, in an attempt to prevent a rise in measles cases similar to that seen in October 2023.

The emotive campaign delivers a powerful message told from the perspective of children about the rising risk of childhood diseases. Parents and carers will see the campaign across broadcast TV, on demand and community TV as well as radio, outdoor posters and social media. It is running with higher coverage in London, the West Midlands and the North West where vaccine uptake is lowest.

**Davina Barrett, a mother from Walsall**, has spoken of her shock at how seriously ill her three-month-old [baby](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Finews.co.uk%2Ftopic%2Fbabies%3Fico%3Din-line_link&data=05%7C02%7CShaun.Whelan%40ukhsa.gov.uk%7C58f2211bf6624109f8ad08dcc67a5358%7Cee4e14994a354b2ead475f3cf9de8666%7C0%7C0%7C638603475882862279%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=VLX3cKv9CUJKpJ2rDOnp1SxNDU152ekMd%2BUMrbG1J78%3D&reserved=0) was after catching [measles](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Finews.co.uk%2Ftopic%2Fmeasles%3Fico%3Din-line_link&data=05%7C02%7CShaun.Whelan%40ukhsa.gov.uk%7C58f2211bf6624109f8ad08dcc67a5358%7Cee4e14994a354b2ead475f3cf9de8666%7C0%7C0%7C638603475882879857%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=08eKjlQOzfB5e04PACvdSWcV0YELgDOmCKWw50Mwfgs%3D&reserved=0). Three-month-old Ezra was rushed to hospital after developing a red spotty rash. Within a few hours he was suffering breathing difficulties and developed pneumonia. Very young infants are at highest risk of severe illness and developing life-long complications from measles, but they are not able to receive their first MMR vaccine until they are aged one, so they can only be protected by ensuring those around them who can, are vaccinated.

Davina is now urging parents to vaccinate their [children](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Finews.co.uk%2Ftopic%2Fchildren%3Fico%3Din-line_link&data=05%7C02%7CShaun.Whelan%40ukhsa.gov.uk%7C58f2211bf6624109f8ad08dcc67a5358%7Cee4e14994a354b2ead475f3cf9de8666%7C0%7C0%7C638603475882889233%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=6eph8DyierBczXlRjwHgcPtUEjfm3IOc4CVQOty2QRo%3D&reserved=0) against the disease and protect those most vulnerable like Ezra.

**Davina said**: “We were so shocked at how bad Ezra got quite quickly.  The rash spread rapidly and covered his entire body. Seeing him struggling to breathe and being hooked up to oxygen was awful.  I had no idea measles could make babies so ill.

“Parents need to know that they are not just protecting their own child, but that the MMR vaccine could save the life of a baby like Ezra who is too young to have his own protection. Measles can be nasty but it’s entirely preventable.”

**Steve Russell, NHS National Director for Vaccinations and Screening, said:** “The NHS is clear that measles can be really dangerous and so it is critical that children get vaccinated.

“So far, NHS efforts have led to thousands more young people getting protected, with over 13% of previously unvaccinated children under the age of five getting protected, but we know there is more to do.

“We are encouraging parents to come forward if their children are not fully protected and have been invited by their GP.”

**Minister for Public Health and Prevention Andrew Gwynne said:** “Measles cases have spiked significantly in recent years and can spread quickly among those who are unvaccinated. It can be a serious and sometimes deadly disease. Vaccines are our best form of protection, and it is vital that children receive all their vaccinations.

“With the autumn term just around the corner, I am urging all parents to catch up on any missed jabs to keep children safe as they return to the classroom or nursery.”

Over the past decade [[uptake levels of childhood vaccines](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/cover-of-vaccination-evaluated-rapidly-cover-programme-2023-to-2024-quarterly-data)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/cover-of-vaccination-evaluated-rapidly-cover-programme-2023-to-2024-quarterly-data) offered through the [[routine NHS vaccination programme](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/nhs-vaccinations-and-when-to-have-them/)](https://www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/toddler/vaccinations-for-children/) in England have been falling across all vaccines, including those that protect against whooping cough, measles, mumps and rubella, polio, meningitis and diphtheria - with England no longer having the levels of population immunity recommended by the World Health Organization that is needed to prevent outbreaks. Crucially, lower vaccine uptake within communities is directly linked to wider health inequalities.

Encouragingly, the MMR Evaluation also found that by the end of April 2024:

* For MMR1, the greatest increases in coverage in children aged under 5 years were observed in London, which has some of the lowest uptake rates in the country.
* For MMR2, the greatest increases in coverage in children aged under 5 years were observed in the North East and Yorkshire.
* The largest coverage increases for MMR1 and MMR2 were consistently seen in ethnic groups, with historically lower MMR coverage.
* For both MMR1 and MMR2, the greatest increase was observed in the most deprived areas.

**For more information contact UKHSA West Midlands press office on 0121 232 9223/4 Out Of Hours 07834 311 393**

**Notes to Editors**

1. MMR is part of the [NHS Routine Childhood Immunisation Programme](https://www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/toddler/vaccinations-for-children/) – with one dose offered at one year and a second dose at 3 years 4 months.
2. **NHS MMR Catch up campaign**

A new national catch-up campaign for MMR was launched by NHS England in November 2023 and included local and national call-recall activities as part of a package of measures encouraging MMR catch-up, in addition to various local and national NHS and UKHSA communications (11).

The call and recall campaign occurred in three phases:

1. Local call and recall of children aged 12 months to 5 years inclusive by GPs in England, from November 2023 onwards.
2. National call and recall of children aged 6 to 11 years in England recorded as unvaccinated or partially vaccinated, from 5th February 2024 onwards.
3. National call and recall extended to include individuals aged 12 to 25 years old registered at a GP or resident in London, Greater Manchester, and the West Midlands, from 5 February 2024 onwards.

For phase ii, eligible cohorts were also targeted within schools with the support of School Age Immunisation Services

In addition to national activities, various regional efforts to improve vaccine uptake have been locally devised, procured and delivered. For example, in the West Midlands, efforts focused on communications and community engagement to supplement the national campaign; these included clinics run in schools, and webinars and presentations for faith leaders, headteachers and governors, with Integrated Care Board (ICB) system partners. Community outreach within target populations, and motivational interview training for NHS staff, have further reinforced the local offer.

1. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) is responsible for protecting every member of every community from the impact of infectious diseases, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents and other health threats. We provide intellectual, scientific and operational leadership at national and local level, as well as on the global stage, to make the nation’s health secure. UKHSA is an executive agency, sponsored by the [Department of Health and Social Care](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care).

Website: [www.gov.uk/ukhsa](http://www.gov.uk/ukhsa) Facebook: [www.facebook.com/UKHealthSecurityAgency](http://www.facebook.com/UKHealthSecurityAgency)

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1. The campaign was initially developed in partnership with Liverpool City Council, NHS North West and NHS Greater Manchester [↑](#footnote-ref-1)