

High schools hit Suburbs face measles outbreak

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Measles. A children's disease, right? Not necessarily.

In addition to a heavier-than-normal outbreak of measles among youngsters this spring, growing numbers of suburban teenagers have been picking up the virus. Health department officials are especially concerned because teenagers who are pregnant when they contract rubella—German measles—run a serious risk of giving birth to deformed or retarded babies.

Officials are urging parents to get their children immunized.

School records partially tell the story. Recently, 50 Livonia Churchill High School students were absent from school because of bouts with measles and rubella, which is also known as three-day measles.

High school and elementary schools in Plymouth, Canton, Farmington and Birmingham have also reported measles outbreaks over the past three weeks.

Health officials say, however, that the problem is actually worse than statistics reveal.

"The reported cases do not represent the true picture," said Dr. Jan Polkowski, head of the Wayne County Department of Health's communicable disease division. "There are a lot of cases that never got reported," she said.

WHILE MEASLES AND rubella can also cause serious complications in those susceptible to the viruses, health officials are particularly concerned

about teenage girls who contract rubella. If they are pregnant, that could mean trouble. The virus is especially dangerous to fetuses in the first three months of development, said Dr. Barbara Carlson of the Oakland County Department of Health's communicable disease division.

"Rubella affects a wide range of organs in the fetus," she said. "That's why it's so dangerous during the first three months, that's when all the organs are developing."

"Exposure to the virus can cause heart, eye, and ear defects as well as general growth retardation," Dr. Carlson said.

"Sometimes," she said, "the child will develop an on-going infection which will be contagious upon birth."

Vaccination is no answer for pregnant women because the live virus in the vaccine would harm the fetus.

The Oakland County Health Department is so careful in dispensing measles and rubella vaccines that girls over the age of 12 are not allowed to receive free vaccines at the department's walk-in clinics. Instead, they are referred to physicians.

"They really have the potential to be pregnant," Dr. Carlson said.

ASKED TO EXPLAIN the outbreak among teenagers, Dr. Carlson said that effective measles and rubella vaccines first became widely available and required as part of school immunization programs in 1970. Many of today's teenagers never got those shots.

As a result, those who made it through grade school without experiencing the high fever, swollen glands and "rash" that means measles or rubella are easy targets for the diseases now.

"When you have a large enough group that does not have immunity, then you're going to have a large outbreak," Dr. Polkowski said.

JUST BECAUSE you've had measles or rubella, doesn't mean you are safe, Dr. Carlson said.

"There are a lot of types of measles.

Testing is still going on, and we haven't even identified all the different types yet," she said, adding that there were "five or six common strains."

It's possible, she said, that someone could be unlucky enough to pick up each of those "common" viruses.

Measles can also lead to complications such as encephalitis, a fever that attacks the central nervous system and can cause retardation, although the chances are one in a thousand. One in 10,000 measles victims die.



Health agencies offer free measles vaccines

Because spring is unexplainably the peak time for outbreaks of measles and rubella, county health officials advise parents to protect the unprotected.

Free measles and rubella vaccinations are available from the Wayne and Oakland County departments of health, and also from your family physician.

IN WAYNE COUNTY, shots are available at the health department's walk-in clinic next to Wayne County General Hospital. The clinic is open from 8:30-11:30 a.m. and 1:30-3 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. It also is open from 1:30-3 p.m. Wednesdays.

Another health department sponsored clinic is located in Taylor at 21201 Eureka Road, between I-75 and the Southland Mall. It is open from 4:30-7:30 p.m. Tuesday and 8:30-11:30 a.m. Fridays.

health department clinics in Pontiac and Southfield.

The Southfield clinic, at the corner of Greenfield and Catalpa, is open from 1-4 p.m. daily.

The Pontiac clinic, located in the Oakland County Service complex, is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily. The Oakland County Health Department will not administer measles vaccines to girls age 12 and older.

Wilcox appointed parks commissioner

Richard R. Wilcox, a former parks commissioner, has been appointed to the Oakland County Parks & Recreation Commission by the county board of commissioners.

He succeeds E. Frank Richardson, former chairman, who left the commission in March. Wilcox's term runs to the end of 1978.

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