UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

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Measles Q&A

According to the California Department of Public Health, 47 confirmed cases of measles have been reported in the state in the period from January 1 through May 29, 2019. As of today, the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has confirmed two cases in Santa Barbara County. The health department contacted individuals who may have been exposed through these cases, and found no connection to UC Santa Barbara.

Dr. Ali Javanbakht, medical director at UC Santa Barbara Student Health Services, sat down with The Current to shed some light on this highly contagious — and previously eradicated — virus.

TC: What is measles?

AJ: Measles is an airborne virus that usually begins with flu-like symptoms — fever, runny or stuffy nose. The characteristic red bumpy rash begins about four days in. It starts at the hairline and continues down the body over the span of a few days. The disease runs its course usually within 10 days or so, but it can be a debilitating illness.

TC: Have any cases been reported at UC Santa Barbara?

AJ: No cases have presented at Student Health Services. The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has confirmed two diagnosed cases of measles in Santa Barbara County.

However, any student who thinks they may have been exposed to measles or has symptoms of measles (fever and rash, and often respiratory or eye irritations) should contact Student Health Services at (805) 893-5361 or contact their primary care provider. Faculty and staff members should contact their local healthcare providers with questions about their immune status.

TC: Why is measles so dangerous?

AJ: In and of itself, measles is a serious and intense illness. An individual who contracts measles could require hospitalization, and in rare cases it can be fatal. Added to that is how quickly it spreads.

It’s difficult, too, because at the beginning it can look like any other cold or flu-like illness. But during those initial four days when we’re trying to make a diagnosis, the individual can be transmitting it to anyone they come in contact with. According to the Centers for Disease Control, measles is so contagious that if one person has it, up to 90% of the people close to that person who are not immune will also become infected.

TC: Who is most at risk of contracting measles?

AJ: People who have not been vaccinated — or are under-vaccinated — are most at risk. So far, the vast majority of people who have contracted measles either weren’t vaccinated at all or were under-vaccinated.

TC: What is the vaccination protocol?

AJ: The Centers for Disease Control recommends that children get the first vaccination around 1 year of age and the second dose at 4 to 6 years of age. Teenagers and adults should also be current on their vaccinations. Properly administered, the measles vaccination provides lifetime immunity.

TC: How do I know if I am properly vaccinated?

AJ: Beginning in fall 2017 we required every new student to show proof of MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination in addition to immunizations for chicken pox, meningitis and tetanus. So if you’re a first- or second-year student, at some point we had to have records of them.

We are asking students to check their immunization status on their Gateway Portal to Student Health so we can determine their immune status. Students will be able to enter dates of vaccinations if we don't have their records. And if students are not able to find their records, we are offering blood tests to determine their immunity to measles.

The testing is free for UC SHIP students and $50 for non-UC SHIP students.

TC: How will Student Health Services respond if a case of measles is diagnosed in a member of the UC Santa Barbara community?

AJ: If a student presents and we suspect measles, our first step is to call the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department, which is the central hub for managing any cases. But we are already partnering with other campus entities such as Housing, Dining and Auxiliary Services, Athletics and the Greek system so we are prepared to respond in accordance with the County's recommendations.

TC: Where can people find more information?

AJ: Our measles page at http://studenthealth.sa.ucsb.edu/home-1/measles contains regular updates, as well as links to the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department, the California Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.