

# Measles: a disease of the past or a disease of the future?

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Have you ever taken something for granted? Perhaps you assume that your job will last forever or that your knees will never give out. You get used to your TV turning on whenever you press the button and you just know that your dog will come when he is called. You know what else you probably take for granted? You probably assume that you will never get polio or mumps or measles.

You might be wrong.

Measles is a highly contagious disease that is transmitted through the air by respiratory droplets. It causes a fever, cough, runny eyes, and a rash, and can lead to serious complications such as pneumonia and encephalitis.

There have been two recent U.S. outbreaks of measles, in California and Arizona, with at least 20 confirmed cases, according to the CDC. The California outbreak, which occurred in San Diego, began with a child who had traveled to Switzerland where an outbreak is ongoing. This might be just an infectious disease anomaly, except for one thing. Most of the infected people in the U.S. had not been vaccinated against measles. This is big.

Concerns about autism, mercury exposure, and even the sheer number of recommended vaccines have taken root in the community. Some parents are opting not to vaccinate their children and they tend to argue vociferously for their right to refuse. While I am all for standing up for yourself in the medical system, this particular trend gives me pause.

For many parents who choose not to vaccinate their children, everything turns out fine. Most of those children don't come down with the dreaded diseases of our parents and grandparents, and do you know why? Those children don't get sick because of something called herd immunity. We, the 'herd,' are generally immunized against measles, mumps and polio and so there isn't much disease floating around for an unvaccinated person to contract. But what will happen as the proportion of unvaccinated people increases? More people will get these serious diseases, and they will sneeze and cough on the rest of us. In addition, as intercontinental travel becomes commonplace, unvaccinated people may find themselves in communities where polio and measles are prevalent. If they catch something, they will carry it with them on the airplane, into restaurants and into the school or workplace. Their personal health decision becomes our community health problem.

This is the problem with the herd. The decisions of the few actually can affect the health of the many. I worry about what will happen as more and more people choose not to vaccinate their children.

If this trend continues, the diseases of the past may just become the diseases of the future.

(image courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control)

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