

Measles outbreak - 444 confirmed cases in Western Cape

The recent measles outbreak in the Western Cape has seen 444 confirmed cases and seven deaths as per the provincial Department of Health. Metropolitan Health Group has experienced 195% increase in treatment costs associated with measles in the Western Cape, across the 17 schemes that it administers.

The number of cases has increased by 190% this year, compared to the same period last year.

Areas such as Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain, Gugulethu, Athlone and the Cape Winelands have been experiencing higher infection rates, which could potentially be attributed to overcrowding. “Children are more prone to infection, especially those at schools where classrooms sizes are bigger, so it is essential that parents take children, especially those between the ages of six months to two years, to clinics for measles immunisations and booster shots,” says Dr Ali Hamdulay, disease risk programme manager at Qualsa, the managed healthcare subsidiary of Metropolitan Health Group.

Government has started accelerating the National Immunisation Programme, which will ensure that more children are vaccinated at the right age, one of the best ways to prevent outbreaks. Furthermore, to help contain the current outbreak, the MEC for Health in the Western Cape, Theuns Botha has announced the availability of 35,000 vaccines in clinics across the province.

Look out for the beginning symptoms of the disease that include a high fever, red watery eyes, runny nose and cough which spreads to a red diffuse rash starting on the face and spreading to the rest of the body. Measles is treated symptomatically and although possible, complications such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and other bacterial infections are rare in an otherwise healthy child or adult.

If you've already had measles, but your body didn't work up enough antibodies with the first infection and resistance is not strong, there is a possibility that you may be re-infected. “Your best defence is a strong immune system. Increase your intake of fresh fruits and vegetables especially those high in Vitamin A as well as consume high energy foods that will build up your immune system to better fight off the disease,” says Hamdulay.

As with any outbreak, practice the following precautions: encourage children to wash their hands regularly; keep sick children at home; keep a hand in front of your nose and mouth when sneezing and coughing and see your doctor immediately if symptoms worsen.

Children who are younger than 12 months, malnourished or immuno-compromised are most at risk of suffering complications. People living with HIV/AIDS and other life-threatening diseases such as Cancer should take special precautions and continue with regular prescribed medication.