

VACCINE-PREVENTABLE DISEASES**Measles alert**

Three laboratory-confirmed measles cases have been detected between 30 October to 5 November in two provinces (Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD). These cases do not yet comprise a cluster or outbreak (defined as three cases within one health district within one month), but warrant heightened attention. There have been changes in health-seeking behaviour since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with declining vaccine coverage rates. Healthcare professionals should remain vigilant when faced with a suspected measles case. Due to complications and mortality associated with measles, it is important for individuals to be aware of symptoms, seek help early and have a blood test to differentiate measles from other rash illnesses such as rubella (German measles).

Measles is a contagious disease caused by the measles virus and is spread by droplets from respiratory secretions of infected persons when coughing or sneezing. People at high risk for severe illness and complications from measles include infants and children aged <5 years, pregnant women and persons with compromised immune systems, such as from certain cancers and HIV infection. Measles starts with respiratory tract symptoms similar to the common cold or 'flu' – fever, tiredness and muscle pain; with 'the three Cs': conjunctivitis (red, watery eyes), cough and coryza (runny nose). The rash of measles usually appears 3–5 days after the start of symptoms, beginning on the face and spreading down the body. It is important for individuals with these signs and symptoms

to visit a clinic/doctor to confirm the diagnosis, and make sure complications of measles do not occur. Measles is a notifiable medical condition (NMC) and any doctor in the public or private sector can send blood specimens to the NICD for testing at no cost to the patient. Throat swabs or urine samples should be sent in addition to blood samples during an outbreak, provided they are collected within 7 days of the date of onset of rash. Any patient with suspected measles should be notified to the NMC Surveillance System and a case investigation form (CIF) should be completed.

Vaccination is the most important way of preventing measles. The National Department of Health provides measles vaccine free of charge at local clinics. After two doses of vaccine, 95% of persons will be protected from measles. The measles vaccine is safe and effective. The MeasBio® (Biovac) vaccine is administered at 6 months of age with a booster at 12 months of age according to the South African Expanded Programme on Immunisation. Public and private providers in South Africa use the MeasBio® (Biovac) vaccine. In the private health sector, there are additional vaccines (Priorix® and Omzzyta®) that each offer protection against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR).

Visit the NICD website at <http://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/measles/> for further information and for the measles case investigation forms. Vaccine information for mothers and caregivers is available at <https://www.nicd.ac.za/faq/vaccination-information-for-parentscaregivers/>.