

Currently there is an outbreak of measles in New Zealand. This remains focussed in the North Island, but with schools holidays and the ski season approaching, now is an important time to focus on how we can prevent measles in Otago and Southland. The most effective way to prevent an outbreak of measles in Otago and Southland is through high uptake of vaccination in the population. MMR is the current measles containing vaccine and while other measles containing vaccines existed prior to MMR, they did not contain Mumps and Rubella. A minimum of two x MMR provides the best level of protection for individuals.

Preventing a Measles Outbreak

Anyone who has not had two MMRs is eligible for a free MMR under the immunisation benefit subsidy. Adults who have been fully vaccinated still may not have received two MMR. This is because MMR was introduced as a single dose to the immunisation schedule in 1990. During the 1990s, a school catch up programme provided a second dose but it wasn't until 2001 that two childhood MMRs were in the childhood immunisation schedule. Practices are encouraged to opportunistically offer MMR to patients who have not received two doses of MMR.

Practices are also encouraged to proactively identify all enrolled patients who are eligible for MMR and offer vaccination. Because this particular outbreak is mostly affecting people aged between 10 and 29 years who did not receive two MMR, it is recommended that practices prioritise catch up vaccinations in those born after 1987. As a second priority, practices are also encouraged to promote catch up to people born between 1969 and 1987 as they may not have received MMR even if they completed their childhood vaccinations. Those born prior to 1969 are assumed to be immune because measles was circulating widely in the community. Wellchild and Plunket books might have a record of vaccination, but if the MMR history remains uncertain, people are encouraged to receive an additional dose.

Preparing for a case of measles

If measles is suspected in a patient, please contact the Medical Officer of Health urgently. Measles is notifiable and highly contagious. Prompt public health action makes control more effective. If Southland and Otago does experience an outbreak of measles, patients who attend your practice may be exposed and require follow up. Should this happen, Public Health South will be in contact. At this stage however, practices are encouraged to review their Infection Prevention and Control policies and review staff immunity. Staff immunity can be demonstrated with a documented history of two X MMR and/or serological evidence of immunity.

Information on the measles outbreak will be available for reference on the Southern DHB website, which is currently being updated. Please contact Naomi Gough if you have any further queries.