

Latest measles outbreak tied to Texas megachurch

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Measles is making a worrisome resurgence across the United States with at least 135 documented cases this year—most recently at a Fort Worth-area megachurch.

Measles, once a common childhood infection that killed up to 500 Americans a year, officially has been eradicated in the Western Hemisphere. For many years, the few dozen measles diagnoses in the United States were “imported” cases in individuals who traveled from countries where the virus remains common. High vaccination rates largely halted the virus at the North American border.

✘ Terri Pearsons and husband George are senior pastors of Eagle Mountain International Church in Newark. She is the daughter of televangelist Kenneth Copeland. The country’s safety net has become more porous in recent years. Although overall vaccination rates remain high, communities of like-minded parents who refuse immunizations for their children have been vulnerable to outbreaks.

The latest measles outbreak is in Texas, where the virus has sickened 25 people, most of whom are members or visitors of a church led by the daughter of televangelist Kenneth Copeland.

Fifteen of the measles cases are connected to [Eagle Mountain International Church](#) in Newark, about 25 miles northwest of Fort Worth. The church’s senior pastor, Terri Pearsons, previously has been critical of measles vaccinations.

A visitor to the church who recently traveled to a country where measles

remains common started the outbreak, according to [Tarrant County Public Health](#) spokesman Al Roy.

Nine children, six adults

Those sickened by measles include nine children and six adults, ranging in age from 4 months old to 44 years old. At least 12 of those infected were not fully immunized against measles, Roy said. The other patients have no record of being vaccinated. The 4-month-old is too young to have been received the measles vaccine, typically given at 1, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

“This is a classic example of how measles is being reintroduced,” said William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert and professor at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville.

The United States has had more than twice as many confirmed measles cases this year than all of last year, when there were just 55, according to the CDC. Flare-ups brought on by foreign travel caused that number to spike as high as 220 measles cases in 2011.

New York City also has battled a measles resurgence this year, with at least 58 cases, mostly in close-knit Orthodox Jewish communities. City officials say the outbreak was started by someone who traveled to the United Kingdom which, along with Europe, has suffered large measles outbreaks in recent years. One of the New York children with measles developed pneumonia. Two pregnant women were hospitalized, and one suffered a miscarriage, city health officials reported.

Whooping cough, mumps

Other vaccine-preventable diseases also have broken out in recent years, including whooping cough and mumps. Some whooping cough outbreaks have clustered around private schools with lax vaccination requirements,

according to CDC studies.

Measles particularly alarms doctors because it spreads like lightning and kills one in every 1,000 people infected. Officials in Oklahoma—which hasn't had a measles case since 1997—said the Texas outbreak has put them on alert for signs of the virus, which produces a characteristic red rash and high fever, and infects about 90 percent of unimmunized people exposed to it. The virus can infect people even two hours after a sick person has left the room.

At the Newark church, the visitor infected not only the congregation and staff, but also the church's on-site day care center, according to an announcement on Eagle Mountain's website. Health officials notified the church of the measles outbreak Aug. 14, and the church sponsored a vaccination clinic Aug. 18.

State requirement

All the school-age children infected in the Eagle Mountain outbreak were home-schooled, health officials say. Texas requires children be vaccinated before attending school.

In an Aug. 15 statement, Eagle Mountain's pastor, Terri Pearsons, said she still has reservations about vaccines.

"The concerns we have had are primarily with very young children who have family history of autism and with bundling too many immunizations at one time," she said.

Young children actually are among the most vulnerable to measles, Schaffner said. Their tiny airways can easily swell shut.

"This is a sadly misinformed religious leader," Schaffner said.