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Your Biggest Risk of Measles May Be a Trip to Europe

by MAGGIE FOX

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Measles has killed 35 people in the past year in Europe, despite efforts to get vaccination rates up to needed levels, the World Health Organization said Tuesday.

Italy and Romania are fighting off the worst outbreaks, which can be entirely blamed on low vaccination rates, WHO said.



Uriah Kreuger, 3, was one of the victims of the Disneyland measles outbreak. Family photo

"The most recent fatality was a 6-year-old boy in Italy, where over 3,300 measles cases and two deaths have occurred since June 2016," WHO said. The boy had leukemia. Kids with cancer are especially vulnerable to infectious diseases such as measles, which is one of the reasons public health agencies urge everyone to vaccinate their children.

"Several other countries have also reported outbreaks; according to national public health authorities, these have caused 31 deaths in Romania, one death in Germany and another in Portugal," WHO added.

Romania has also had more than 3,000 cases in the past year, WHO said.

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Earlier this year, Italy made measles vaccines mandatory for kids to go to school — one of the policies that keeps vaccination rates high in the United States. But unlike in the United States, Italy has added a fine of as much as

\$8,000 for parents who fail to vaccinate their children.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that U.S. travelers make sure they are up to date on measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccines before they leave the country. Measles has been eliminated in the United States, but there are still occasional outbreaks caused by travelers who bring the virus with them and infecting unvaccinated or undervaccinated people.

“Measles remains a leading cause of death among children worldwide, and unfortunately Europe is not spared.”

Minnesota is counting down to the end of an outbreak that infected 78 people this year. Once two incubation periods are up without any new infections — at the end of this month — the state can declare its outbreak over.

Minnesota's outbreak was fueled by a huge drop in vaccination influenced by vaccine critics who targeted the Somali immigrant community.

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Vaccine critics have also helped lower rates in Italy, the country's health authorities say. Vaccination rates fell from 90 percent in 2010 to 85 percent in 2015.

"Every death or disability caused by this vaccine-preventable disease is an unacceptable tragedy," said Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO's regional director for Europe.

"We are very concerned that although a safe, effective and affordable vaccine is available, measles remains a leading cause of death among children worldwide, and unfortunately Europe is not spared," Jakab said. "Working closely with health authorities in all European affected countries is our priority to control the outbreaks and maintain high vaccination coverage for all sections of the population."

Related: U.S. Travelers Skip Measles Vaccines

Europe has been struggling to control measles for years. One of the worst recent years was 2013, when there were more than 10,000 cases across Europe. From July 2014 to June 2015, there were 4,224 cases, most of them in Germany, and 1,818 cases were reported from summer 2015 to July 2016.

The worst recent year in the United States was 2014, when there were 667 cases of measles. So far this year, the CDC reports 108 measles cases in the United States.

Experts say that to control measles, 95 percent of the population must be vaccinated or immune because of a past infection. Measles is one of the most infectious viruses — it infects 90 percent of people who are exposed to it if they aren't immune, and it can hang in the air and infect people who enter a room as long as two hours after an infected person has left.

WHO says measles killed 134,200 people worldwide in 2015. But vaccination campaigns have caused a 79 percent drop in measles deaths since 2000.

"During 2000-2015, measles vaccination prevented an estimated 20.3 million deaths, making measles vaccine one of the best buys in public health," WHO says.

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