

Children Who Had Chickenpox Vaccine Contract Disease

Maryland and federal health officials will converge on Takoma Park Elementary School next week to find out why at least **12 students contracted chickenpox in the past two months despite receiving vaccinations against the disease.**

Of the **16 cases** of chickenpox tallied so far at the Montgomery County school, **all but four involved youngsters who reportedly received the vaccine** before they were 3 years old.

Physicians are not required to report chickenpox to government agencies, and it isn't clear whether the number of cases logged at the school so far is accurate -- especially because some cases are so mild that parents aren't aware of them.

Officials with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will use a survey to nail down the numbers and help whether the vaccine has failed in some way.

Jane Seward, acting chief of CDC's child vaccine and preventable diseases branch, said she is not alarmed by Takoma Park Elementary's outbreak.

It is possible the high percentage of cases among reportedly vaccinated children merely reflects **the Maryland chickenpox vaccination rate, one of the highest in the nation**, she said.

"That's what you start to see when a state achieves a high coverage rate for a vaccine," she said. In 1999, **78.5 percent of Maryland children in the target age group were vaccinated**, the third-best performance of any state, she said.

Since chickenpox vaccine was licensed in 1995, its use has grown steadily, she said. **Doctors never expected it to wipe out the illness**; instead the vaccine is supposed to prevent chickenpox in 80 to 85 percent of those who receive it and prevent severe cases from developing in the rest, she said.

Severe cases bring hundreds of painful blisters, high fever, excruciating itchiness, possible infection caused by scratching, and decreased appetite caused by sores in the mouth.

In extreme cases, patients can develop pneumonia, brain infection or bleeding disorders, Seward said. CDC says more than 5,000 people are hospitalized and about 100 die of chickenpox nationwide each year.

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