

Measles Outbreak Worsens in Washington State

Most of the 34 patients are under 10 years old, and almost all have been confirmed as unvaccinated against the virus.

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CATHERINE OFFORD



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The number of confirmed measles cases in southwest Washington state has grown to 34, with at least 30 of the patients not having been vaccinated against the virus, the

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[Associated Press](#) reports today (January 28). The outbreak, which started at the end of December and prompted Washington's governor to [declare](#) a public health emergency earlier this month, has drawn further attention to the dangerous consequences of vaccination exemptions.

“Measles was eliminated from the US in 2000, but it's been allowed to return,” Peter Hotez, an infectious diseases researcher at Baylor College of Medicine, tells [Vox](#). He adds that the blame falls partly on “ignorant and cowardly state legislatures, and a failure by governments to mount a pro-vaccine advocacy campaign.”

The majority of the infections are in children younger than 10 years old. A further nine cases of measles are suspected, the *AP* reports.

While almost all states allow exemptions from their vaccination legislation on religious grounds, Washington state is one of 18 states that also allow exemptions on the grounds of personal or moral beliefs.

In Clark County, the area that's been worst affected in the current outbreak, 7.9 percent of children entering kindergarten were exempted from vaccination as of the 2017–2018 school year, [The Washington Post](#) reports. The overall measles vaccination rate in the county, according to the *AP*, is just 78 percent—far short of the more than 92 percent recommended to provide immunity for the community.

Such areas “are now a major anti-vaccine hotspot due to nonmedical vaccine exemptions that have nothing to do with religion,” Hotez tells *Vox*. Thanks to the high numbers of unvaccinated children, “this epidemic could last a while.”

Health officials in Oregon have raised concerns that the virus could easily cross the border. Oregon also has a high nonmedical exemption rate for vaccinations—one 2018 state [analysis](#) found a rate among kindergarteners of 7.5 percent, with the number for K-12 students climbing as high as 10 percent in some counties.

Clark County has so far poured \$100,000 into trying to contain the outbreak, with staff being reassigned from other duties to help manage the public health effort. “It's all hands on deck,” Alan Melnick, the county health officer, tells the *AP*. “Clearly this is going to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and it