



Medical Officer of Health Report October 2019 Measles

New Zealand is experiencing an extensive outbreak of measles. This coincides with outbreaks in other countries such as America, but New Zealand has had more confirmed cases of measles this year than America which has a population of 327m.

Measles is usually an uncommon infection in New Zealand, table one shows the pattern over recent years.

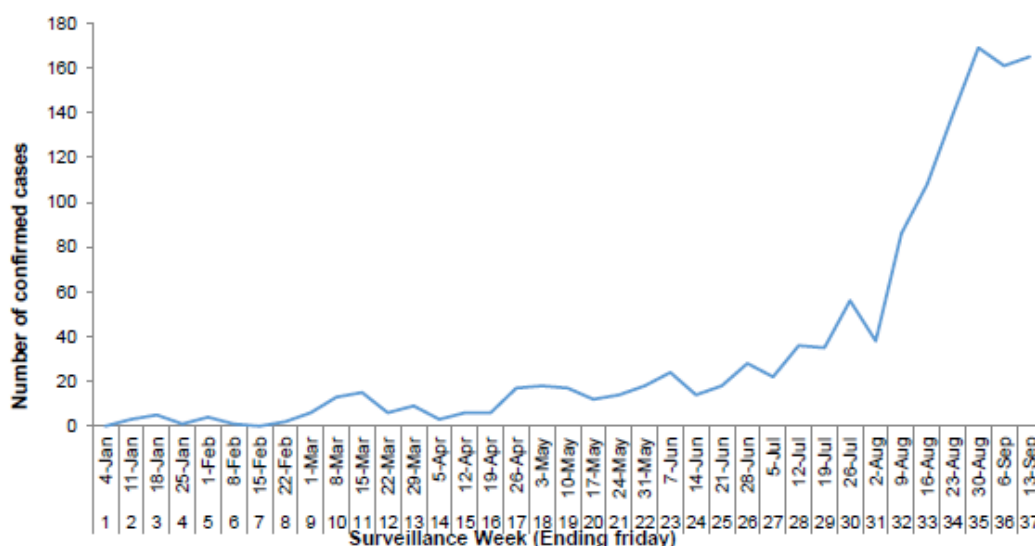
Table 1: Confirmed cases of measles in New Zealand by year

2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
1366*	30	15	103	10	280	8

* as at 19 September, 2019

Figure 1: Shows the number of confirmed cases from across the country each week this year.

Figure 1. Number of confirmed measles notifications by week, 1 January–13 September 2019



Canterbury had a localised outbreak of about 40 cases in February/March before cases began appearing in several districts round the North Island from April. Since mid July Auckland has been the focus of the outbreak, in particular among Pacific Peoples in South Auckland. Greater Auckland has reported 1,120 of the 1,366 cases year to date, with 775 of those being residents of South Auckland.

Locally, Toi Te Ora Public Health (Toi Te Ora) has followed up 47 confirmed cases of measles so far this year, along with over 100 more that were quite appropriately notified as suspected cases, but

which were later found to not be measles. Toi Te Ora also follows up the contacts of cases to ensure that if they develop the infection they do not pass it on to others. So in terms of workload this means our service has followed up over 1,000 individuals, usually by phone. Toi Te Ora has also coordinated most of the interaction with the general public about measles, doing this via information on our website and through numerous media interviews.

Measles is a severe illness and one which is particularly infectious. A measles case can be expected to spread the virus to about 15 other susceptible (ie unvaccinated) people. Humans are the only known host of the measles virus and experts believe that measles could be totally eliminated if all countries could achieve vaccination rates consistently above 95%. The World Health Organisation declared New Zealand measles free in 2017, meaning there was no longer any generalised spread of measles between people within New Zealand. All our cases occurred in people coming in to New Zealand from other countries who then passed the virus on to their unvaccinated close contacts. Our measles free status is now in question as the threat of widespread transmission of infection throughout communities grows.

More than one out of every three cases this year has required hospitalisation including several who needed to be admitted to intensive care. While the outbreak has reminded many of the importance of being vaccinated, this has also led to a shortage of vaccine which the Ministry of Health is in the process of resolving.

Immunisation against a range of infectious illnesses was a major success of 20th century health care. Outbreaks such as the current one serve as a reminder that we must never lose sight of its importance. At a national level we must always have sufficient stock of vaccines. Primary care providers must remain focused on achieving high rates of immunisation coverage, and individuals (especially parents) need to be able to trust their health advisors.

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