

'It's never too late to catch up' – parents and carers urged to protect their children with MMR vaccine

Parents and carers are being reminded that 'it's never too late to catch up' and urged to ensure their children have both doses of the MMR vaccine to avoid the 'real risk' of a measles outbreak.

This comes after a warning from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) that, without increased uptake of the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine, measles could spread rapidly, leading to an outbreak of the vaccine preventable disease.

Measles is extremely contagious - spending just 15 minutes in the same room as an infected person is often enough to catch it. Most people who are not immune, and who come into contact with someone with measles, will catch measles.

Complications can be severe, including pneumonia, blindness, deafness, and brain swelling.

For Scarlett and Dan Jones, from County Durham, the danger became real when, while living in Cheshire last year, their seven-month-old daughter Saskia suddenly fell ill.

Too young to have had her first MMR jab, Saskia developed red, swollen eyes, a fever of 39.4°C and was struggling to breathe. She was rushed to hospital, where she needed oxygen and intravenous fluids.

"It was terrifying," Scarlett said. "The doctors initially thought that it could be meningitis, and it took a while for them to diagnose measles as they had never seen a case of it before.

"We want all parents to know just how important the MMR vaccine is – not just for their own children but for those who are still too young to have it."

Saskia's two-year-old brother Theo, who had been vaccinated, did not catch the virus and Saskia was finally discharged from hospital, to recover at home, once her symptoms had become stable. The family's experience shows just how vital it is to keep vaccination rates high to protect the most vulnerable.

Children need two doses of the MMR vaccine, the first around their first birthday and the second at three years and four months**, for full protection. Yet uptake of the second dose has slipped below the national target of 95%.

Dr Catherine Monaghan, medical director for the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, said: "Measles is one of the most infectious diseases in the world – and it is entirely preventable through the MMR vaccination.

"Ensuring your children are properly immunised is one of the most important things you can do to protect their health.

"Here in the North East and North Cumbria uptake of MMR remains high overall, but we can't be complacent because low rates in some areas could leave room for outbreaks and frightening cases like Saskia's.

"If your child has missed any doses, it's never too late to catch up.

"The MMR vaccine is safe, free, and offers the best protection for your child – please don't leave your child unprotected - act now!"

****From 1 January 2026, changes to the MMR vaccination programme will mean that children born on or after 1 July 2024 will receive their second dose at 18 months of age, while those born on or before 30 June 2024 will continue to have their second dose at 3 years 4 months.**

All parents and carers are urged to check their child's "Red Book" Personal Child Health Record or, if they are still not sure, to contact their GP practice to check if their children are fully vaccinated.

Ends