



*For immediate release: March 3, 2011
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Measles Scare in New Mexico

A New Mexico resident returning home from London created news headlines recently when it was confirmed she had measles while traveling, possibly exposing travelers in three airports.

While the US Centers for Disease Control track those she came in contact with, doctors urge continued immunizations against the illness. “The measles virus continues to be a big problem in developing countries, and is one of the most highly contagious viruses,” said Dr Francine Olmstead, a pandemic disease consultant and the Medical Director at NM Travel Health, www.nmtravelhealth.com.

Worldwide, it’s estimated that 43 million cases of measles occur, resulting in more than one million deaths. In the United States, about 350 cases occur, most as a result of exposure outside the United States. Those immunized in childhood are generally well-protected against the virus.

“Measles is spread from any contact with an infected person, including coughing and sneezing,” said Olmstead, “so you can imagine the concern about this virus and the exposure to others in the closed environment of an airplane. This is a virus that can live for several hours after the person leaves the area.”

The symptoms of measles include fever, cough, runny nose and a red rash. Other symptoms include diarrhea and ear infections. Measles is a virus so it’s not treated with antibiotics. Often, the disease must run its course, however, many individuals who contract measles require hospitalization. Complications are usually more severe among infants, individuals with weakened immune systems and adults who catch the virus. Pneumonia, swelling of the brain and even death can be a result from measles.

“If an individual has had two doses of the MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccine, or if they were born before 1957 and diagnosed with measles as a child, they would be considered immune. But those who are uncertain or do not have documentation of the vaccine should consider a blood test to test for immunity to measles or receive the MMR vaccine,” said Dr. Olmstead. “This is especially important for anyone who will be traveling overseas, particularly to high-risk areas around the world.”

Olmstead, a 1997 graduate of the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, is a specialist in travel health and one of just a few thousand medical providers worldwide to have earned the Certificate of Knowledge in Travel Health, administered by the International Society of Travel Medicine. She is also Board Certified in Internal Medicine.

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Background: Dr. Francine Olmstead earned her MD from the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in 1997. Since 2001, Dr. Olmstead has sub-specialized in International Travel Medicine. She has been providing consultative services to patients, medical professionals and companies regarding International Travel Health and Pandemic Planning and Awareness Education. She is the President and Medical Director for NM Travel Health, a division of Olmstead Health Care Services, LLC, with offices in Albuquerque and Farmington. Dr. Olmstead is also board certified in Internal Medicine.