

# Second unvaccinated child dies of measles in Texas under Kennedy's watch

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The worsening measles epidemic in Texas has claimed another life. An eight-year-old girl from Lubbock died Thursday morning from measles-related pulmonary failure, becoming the second child in the state to lose her life, and the third in the regional outbreak that involves four states. (The March 6, 2025, death of an adult in New Mexico from Lea County remains under investigation.)

The tragedy comes just weeks after the first Texas school-aged child succumbed to complications from measles in February. Both children were unvaccinated, a fact that underscores the preventable nature of their deaths. The outbreak has now officially infected 481 Texans and spread to neighboring states, and the true number of infections is certainly well over 1,000.

Public health officials are struggling not only with the disease itself but also with the disinformation fueling vaccine hesitancy, emanating above all from Trump's Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who continues to downplay the outbreak.

Since late January 2025, measles cases have surged across the American Southwest, with Texas at the epicenter of the outbreak. The state has reported a 14 percent weekly increase in cases, with clusters concentrated in cities like Lubbock, Amarillo, and El Paso. Over 90 percent of infections involve unvaccinated individuals, primarily children under the age of 18. The outbreak has spilled into neighboring states, including New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Kansas, bringing the total number of confirmed cases nationwide to 607.

Texas health officials have reported that some of the hospitals in the affected region are overwhelmed by severe complications from measles, such as pneumonia and encephalitis. Covenant Children's Hospital in Lubbock has reported bed shortages as pediatric ICUs struggle to accommodate patients. Dr. Alicia Torres, an infectious disease specialist at Covenant Children's, described the situation as unprecedented, stating, "We're seeing measles stages we haven't encountered in decades. Parents are horrified when they realize this wasn't just a 'mild rash.'"

The United States had achieved elimination status with measles in 2000, a milestone that marked the absence of continuous disease transmission for more than 12 months

thanks to widespread vaccination efforts. However, the current outbreak threatens this status and exposes the country's public health vulnerabilities driven by declining vaccination rates and rising vaccine exemptions.

The outbreak is one of the largest in 25 years and is on track to rival or surpass the 1,274 cases reported in 2019, which was the worst year for measles in the US since its elimination. The surge in 2019 was in large part due to persistent efforts by Andrew Wakefield, Del Bigtree and Kennedy, central figures in the anti-vaccine movement, to promote debunked conspiracy theories about vaccines and alleging collusion between government officials and pharmaceutical companies to conceal non-existent vaccine harms.

Wakefield, the thoroughly discredited researcher of a retracted 1998 *Lancet* paper that attempted to link MMR vaccines to autism, and Bigtree, CEO of the Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN), joined forces in 2016 to produce the anti-vaccine propaganda film *Vaxxed* that promoted false claims that vaccines are linked to autism and other health maladies.

Through ICAN and his webcast, *The Highwire*, Bigtree has propagated false information about vaccines, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging viewers to refuse vaccination and spread conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. His organization targets audiences distrustful of government and expertise, amplifying vaccine hesitancy among vulnerable communities such as the Somali community in Minneapolis which experienced large measles outbreaks in 2017 and 2024.

Significantly, in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten threats to global health. They warned that declining vaccination rates had facilitated a comeback of measles. In that year, there were approximately 873,000 cases, a fivefold increase compared to 2016 when there were only 132,500 cases. Although the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a decline in measles cases due to the limited efforts to halt the spread of COVID, by 2022 the number of measles cases had exploded to 8.6 million globally. By 2023, cases increased another 20 percent to 10.3 million worldwide.

The resurgence of measles highlights the disturbing trend of

declining vaccination rates across the US in recent years. Nationally, only about 92.7 percent of kindergartners were fully vaccinated with two doses of the MMR vaccine during the 2023–2024 school year—a sharp decline from the 95.2 percent coverage reported in 2019–2020. This leaves approximately 280,000 children unprotected against measles each year. Even more alarming is the drop in first-dose vaccination rates for children by age 15 months, which fell to just 68.5 percent in 2024—a significant decrease from pre-pandemic levels.

Certain states are particularly vulnerable due to low vaccination rates and high exemption levels. Idaho and Colorado rank among the worst performers when it comes to MMR coverage among kindergartners, with rates of just 79.6 percent and 87.4 percent, respectively—well below the herd immunity threshold of 95 percent.

These states also allow widespread nonmedical exemptions for religious or philosophical reasons. In Idaho, over 14 percent of kindergartners are exempt from vaccination requirements, creating large pockets of susceptibility to outbreaks. Texas, where the outbreak is most severe, has similarly concerning exemption rates; some counties like Gaines County report exemption levels as high as 18 percent, leaving entire communities vulnerable to rapid disease spread.

Amid this crisis, Kennedy has amplified falsehoods about measles and the MMR vaccine that have undermined public health efforts. He has claimed that immunity from the MMR vaccine wanes over time, leaving adults vulnerable to measles infection—a statement contradicted by scientific evidence showing that immune memory cells provide lifelong protection even if antibody levels decline slightly. He has also alleged that the MMR vaccine causes fatal conditions such as encephalitis and blindness, despite overwhelming evidence that severe adverse effects occur in fewer than one per million doses. By contrast, measles itself causes encephalitis in one out of every thousand cases.

Kennedy has further argued that “natural immunity” gained through infection is superior to vaccine-induced immunity—a dangerous assertion given that “natural immunity” requires surviving a disease with a fatality rate of 1-2 per 1000 infections. Furthermore, studies have shown that measles has the capacity to essentially erase one’s immune system memory, making patients highly susceptible to other infectious diseases to which they were previously immune.

Instead of advocating for an urgent mass vaccination campaign—a basic public health measure that any prior Health Secretary would have done—Kennedy has instead promoted vitamin A and cod liver oil as quack remedies for measles or even alternatives to vaccination. His recommendations have led to at least ten cases of pediatric vitamin A toxicity in Texas hospitals; children initially hospitalized for measles complications later exhibited abnormal liver function due to excessive vitamin A intake.

While high-dose vitamin A can reduce measles-related

mortality in malnourished populations like those in parts of Africa, it is totally inappropriate for well-nourished areas such as Texas and poses significant risks when consumed in excess.

Kennedy’s insistence that vaccination remain a “personal choice”—a commonly employed anti-vax artifice—has drawn sharp criticism from public health experts who argue that reckless individual decisions can endanger entire communities when herd immunity is compromised. Dr. Marcus Chen of the Texas Medical Association expressed frustration: “This isn’t a matter of choice when your decisions endanger others.”

Meanwhile, as Texas grapples with its measles crisis, the threat of an H5N1 “bird flu” pandemic looms ever larger. Last week, Mexico confirmed its first human case of H5N1, with a three-year-old girl from Durango hospitalized in serious condition after contracting the virus. Although Mexican health officials have stated that no human-to-human transmission has been observed, it will be important for public health officials to sequence the strain and share such information collaboratively regionally, and more broadly, internationally.

The political response to H5N1 echoes disturbing patterns with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Trump has previously dismissed concerns about H5N1 on Truth Social, calling it a “hoax,” while Kennedy has likened it to “seasonal flu” and has even suggested that poultry farms should allow their flocks to be infected so they can achieve “herd immunity.” This is dangerous nonsense and would only hasten the emergence of a bird flu pandemic.

The concurrent crises of measles, H5N1, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic reveal in full force the inability of moribund capitalism to confront public health crises that threaten humanity.

While measles outbreaks are entirely preventable through mass vaccination programs supported by decades of scientific evidence, anti-vaccine rhetoric continues to erode trust in these life-saving measures. Similarly, downplaying emerging threats like H5N1 is a grim echo of the ruling elites’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which political leaders prioritized profits over the well-being of the world’s population.



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