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Wisconsin Measles Outbreak Hits 832 Cases and Two Pediatric Deaths, Heightening Risks for Immunocompromised Patients

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Wisconsin's largest measles outbreak in more than 35 years has reached 832 confirmed cases, 19 hospitalizations, and two pediatric deaths as of November 20, 2026, according to surveillance data from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS). Having begun in August 2026 and expanded across roughly 20 counties -- including major population hubs such as Dane and Marathon counties alongside heavy concentrations in southwestern counties like Grant, Lafayette, and Iowa -- the surge has prompted urgent public health warnings for immunocompromised residents who cannot safely receive the live-attenuated Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine .

Roughly 94 to 96 percent of confirmed cases in the Wisconsin outbreak involve people who are unvaccinated or whose vaccination status is unknown. With two pediatric fatalities reported on November 5 and November 13 -- the state's first measles-associated deaths since 1990 -- and public exposure alerts issued across hospitals and community venues, clinicians are emphasizing how herd-immunity gaps directly endanger medically vulnerable populations.

Epidemiological Trajectory of the 832-Case Surge

After accelerating by more than 180 cases in a single week in mid-November, Wisconsin's outbreak has become one of the most severe state-level measles resurgences in decades. Measles virus spreads through respiratory aerosols that remain suspended and infectious in indoor air for up to two hours after an infectious individual leaves a space, with a basic reproduction number high enough that population immunity must remain near 95 percent to prevent sustained community transmission.

Because infected individuals become contagious roughly four days before the classic maculopapular rash appears, routine visits to grocery stores, clinics, and hospital waiting rooms frequently generate multi-county exposure advisories. In response, the Wisconsin DHS and local and Tribal health departments have distributed thousands of MMR vaccine doses to affected jurisdictions while urging residents to verify their immunization records through the Wisconsin Immunization Registry (WIR).

| Surveillance / Clinical Metric | | Verified Wisconsin DHS Record (Nov. 20, 2026) | | Public Health Implication |

| Confirmed Cases | | 832 cases across ~20 counties | | Largest Wisconsin measles outbreak in >35 years |

| Hospitalizations & Fatalities | | 19 hospitalizations; 2 pediatric deaths | | First Wisconsin measles deaths since 1990 |

| Vaccination Status Breakdown | | ~94%-96% unvaccinated or unknown status | | Transmission driven by local immunity gaps |

| Immunocompromised Prophylaxis | | MMR contraindicated; immune globulin (IG) used | | Requires rapid post-exposure clinical outreach |

Why Immunocompromised Patients Face Compounded Risk

Unlike inactivated or subunit vaccines, the standard MMR vaccine contains live-attenuated measles, mumps, and rubella viruses. While safe and highly effective for immunocompetent children and adults, live-attenuated viral vaccines are strictly contraindicated in severely immunocompromised individuals -- including organ-transplant recipients, patients undergoing active cancer chemotherapy, and individuals with primary immunodeficiencies -- as well as pregnant people.

Consequently, immunocompromised residents cannot build active vaccine-induced immunity during an outbreak and depend almost entirely on high community vaccination coverage to shield them from exposure. When measles penetrates community immunity and enters clinics or public spaces, immunocompromised patients face substantially higher rates of life-threatening complications, including viral pneumonia and acute encephalitis (brain swelling), often without mounting the typical early rash that alerts clinicians to measles.

Immune Globulin Post-Exposure Prophylaxis and Clinical Triage

For immunocompromised patients or pregnant individuals who experience a known measles exposure, clinical guidelines rely on passive immunity via immune globulin (IG) rather than MMR vaccination. Administered promptly after exposure, pooled human immune globulin supplies pre-formed neutralizing antibodies that can prevent infection or blunt severe disease while the patient's own immune system is unable to respond to live vaccination.

Wisconsin health authorities also stress strict triage precautions: anyone -- especially immunocompromised patients or families with children under age 5 -- who develops fever, cough, conjunctivitis, or rash after a potential exposure should call their healthcare provider or clinic before arriving in person. Calling ahead enables medical staff to arrange airborne isolation protocols immediately upon arrival, preventing secondary exposures inside waiting rooms filled with other vulnerable patients.

References & Primary Sources

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