



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors and Health Journalists

Issued by: Department of Health

Date: Wednesday, 26 August 2026

Department calls for immediate national response to immunisation crisis

Pretoria – The Department of Health is calling for urgent action to halt declining immunisation coverage and prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases with potential to threaten to reverse decades of public health gains, including significant reductions in under-five and infant mortality achieved since the mid-2000s.

The proportion of unvaccinated infants (children under one year receiving no vaccinations) has increased from 12.1% in 2017 to an alarming 36.3% between January and April 2026 – effectively tripling the number of completely unvaccinated children and leaving hundreds of thousands of infants at risk of life-threatening illnesses.

Routine coverage has fallen severely across all 52 districts in the country. First-dose coverage among children under one year dropped from 87% in 2021 to 67% in 2025. Coverage of the Hexavalent (6-in-1) infant vaccine declined from 87% to 60.5% over the same period. At current rates, South Africa is unlikely to reach the World Health Organization's critical 90% coverage threshold for childhood immunisation, unless urgent interventions are implemented, and these include parents and families taking their unvaccinated children to the health facilities and healthcare providers for immunisation.

The consequences of declining coverage include the resurgence of serious vaccine-preventable diseases, erosion of community (herd) immunity, and higher rates of long-term disability and death among infants. This is no longer a theoretical risk because active outbreaks are occurring in multiple provinces across the country..

Since January 2026, South Africa has recorded 3,462 laboratory-confirmed measles cases, with outbreaks reported in the Western Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape and other provinces. The majority of cases (70.9%) are in children aged 1–14 years, directly linked to low immunisation coverage.

The Department underscores the importance of ensuring that South Africans remain protected from polio in line with our status as a polio-free country. This is despite the recent confirmation of imported polio virus strains detected in wastewater in Cape Town. South Africa maintained a polio-free status since 2014.

Sporadic cases of Diphtheria – a serious bacterial infection of the nose and throat that can obstruct breathing, have been detected, primarily in the Western Cape, underscoring gaps in booster coverage and disease surveillance. Pertussis (whooping cough) cases have also been identified in several provinces, predominantly affecting infants under six months who are too young to be fully vaccinated. This pattern signals a failure of herd immunity to protect the most vulnerable.

Nearly 400 Rubella (German measles) cases have been recorded, mostly among children aged 1–14 years in several parts of the country. This poses severe risks for pregnant women due to the potential for Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS).

The decline in routine immunisation rates has created a public health emergency characterised by childhood disease outbreaks. Addressing it requires coordinated action across all sectors of society, with particular emphasis on engaging families and communities where vaccination rates are lowest. Unvaccinated children can endanger infants and immunocompromised individuals who cannot be vaccinated, and weak coverage undermines early detection and rapid response to emerging threats.

The Department is prioritising an immediate, coordinated national response, including catch-up vaccination campaigns targeting children who have missed doses and under-immunised cohorts in all districts. The public is urged to rely on official government platforms for accurate immunisation information and to disregard unverified claims and misinformation circulating on social media platforms.

The Department secures adequate vaccine supplies and maintains cold-chain infrastructure nationwide to ensure no child is left behind due to access constraints. All vaccines used in South Africa are evaluated and registered by the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA), confirming their safety and effectiveness.

Parents, caregivers and communities are strongly encouraged to protect their children against vaccine-preventable diseases by visiting the nearest healthcare facility or provider for routine and catch-up immunisations.

Disease outbreaks can disrupt children's early development through prolonged school absence and reduced access to structured learning, with potential negative effects on mental well-being. Families also bear significant burdens: parents may need to stay home when children are excluded from school or fall ill, leading to lost wages and employment instability. Every child deserves protection, and safeguarding them is a collective responsibility.

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