Uptake of MMR vaccine and other life-saving children's jabs falls with Covid making it worse, i analysis shows

Last year in total more than 92,000 children hadn't received both MMR doses at five-years-old in England

Childhood vaccinations are down across all routine jabs (Photo: AP)

By Rachel Sharma, Thomas Saunders

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Uptake of life-saving routine childhood vaccines such as the MMR jab has been declining since 2012 and worsened during Covid, i analysis has found.

Experts have warned urgent action must be taken to reverse the falling rates of jab uptake and protect children from life-threatening illness.

Vaccine uptake fell for nine of the 13 jabs given to children in England last year with the MMR vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps and rubella, well below the 95 per cent target set by the World Health Organisation, analysis of official NHS figures show.

Under 15,000 children had not received their 8th and meningitis C booster by the time they turned five.

Last year in total more than 92,000 children had not received both MMR doses at the age of five in England.

And more than 100,000 children didn't receive their booster for the Diphtheria, Tetanus & Pertussis (DTaP/IPV/Hib) vaccine (at least one dose, or 6-in-1 vaccine, also commonly known as the DTaP/IPV/Hib/HepB vaccine, which protects children against a range of dangerous diseases).

Another 51,000 children had not received their Hib and meningitis C booster by the time they turned five.

Uptake for the majority of childhood vaccines peaked in 2011 and has been falling ever since, the figures show.

As a result, scientists and public health experts have warned the Government that it is "critical" to step up efforts to address the decline in vaccinations and that measles is "far more dangerous than Covid".

Experts also told i that globally, childhood vaccination uptake is nearing its worst rate in 20 years.

Campaign groups and parents of clinically vulnerable children who are not able to receive routine vaccines also fear that the lower uptake will put children in danger.

In England, coverage of the Diphtheria, Tetanus & Pertussis Vaccine has fallen from 95.8 per cent in 2011 to 92.2 per cent in 2020 among five-year-olds with the booster dose falling from 88.9 per cent in 2012 to 85.3 per cent in 2021.

MMR coverage among five-year-olds has fallen from 95 per cent in 2016 to 94.3 per cent for a single dose in 2020. For both doses it has fallen from 86.6 per cent in 2014 to 86.6 per cent in 2020.

Coverage of vaccines for one and two-year-olds has also fallen considerably in the last few years with MMR not reaching the 95 per cent coverage level at those ages set by the World Health Organisation.

Professor of Children's Health at UCL Helen Bedford said falling uptake is "very clearly related to the pandemic".

She said problems which contributed to a decline in childhood jabs pre-pandemic – such as a reduction in health visitor numbers and NHS cuts – have been "exacerbated" during Covid, as many healthcare staff were routinely redeployed to fight the virus.

Additionally, one in five health visitors were lost between 2015 and 2019 – the full-time equivalent of 18 per cent of the workforce – which Professor Bedford pays down to lack of training.

She said health visitors were vital for promoting vaccine confidence. Health visitors are community-based and build relationships with families throughout a child's development.

They are a part of call for anyone experiencing concerns of difficulties and were trusted by their patients.

A lot of this would have been "jeopardised" in lockdowns and the months that followed, Prof Bedford said.

Experts warn current figures are a warning and being could result in severe measles outbreaks (Photo: PA)

"From providing support, information, promotion of vaccination, many young families didn't get those sort of routine visits to the extent that would usually would because of the absence of staff numbers, and because people were working in other areas," she said.

She added that she is confident that and vaccine sentiment is not behind the drop in figures.

Research she has worked on, due to come out this summer, asked parents several questions about their views on vaccination and more than 96 per cent said they considered jabs to be very important for their children's health.

"When the first lockdown came in in March 2020, it was very clear that we should stay at home, and evidence shows a lot of parents were unsure whether vaccines services were continuing.

"Some parents were afraid to go to health settings for fear of catching Covid, or didn't want to burden the NHS, because the message was very clearly 'we need to save the NHS," she said.

Vaccine hesitancy across England

Vaccine hesitancy for children's vaccinations varies across England. Some areas, particularly those in London, have far higher levels of hesitancy compared to the rest of the country.

In Camden, 49 per cent of children hadn't received both MMR doses by the age of five in 2020. In Hackney, 36 per cent were yet to receive a jab, and 31 per cent had not had both jabs in Westminster.

This is compared to just three per cent in County Durham and 4.5 per cent in Sunderland.

However Dr Justina Voles, Director of Policy and Public Affairs at Royal Society for Public Health said "it is imperative that we continue to combat vaccine misinformation by reinforcing the safety and efficacy of vaccines in preventing severe disease, and offer parents and carers support, advice and information so that they feeling empowered to make informed decisions and their children vaccinated".

As the country looks to live with Covid, experts say it is 'critical' the Government takes it seriously. Dr Camilla Kingdon, President Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) said: "To see data that 1 in 10 children are at risk of measles over the age of five makes for sober reading, when we have the vaccines to ensure that these group of diseases are confined to history.

"The RCPCH has been reiterating the importance of children receiving all the immunisations they are eligible for. We must tackle this issue.

"Given the concerns that Government has been published this long overdue vaccination strategy alongside a new, cross-departmental child health strategy. Health professionals should take the opportunity to talk to families about immunisations and respond to any questions they may have."

Parent fears lower vaccination rates will put her clinically vulnerable daughter at risk

A parent whose daughter is immunosuppressed is concerned that lower uptake of routine childhood vaccines could put her child at risk.

Her daughter, eight, has leukodystrophy, which is a rare genetic disorder that affects the 'white matter' of the brain and can cause a loss of physical and mental skills.

Health experts have advised that it is not suitable that she receive routine childhood vaccinations because of her condition.

The parent, who asked to remain anonymous, said: "Polio she is seriously ill, she is also on a medically intelligent little girl who would be the life and soul of a party. What you or I would deem a simple cold or simple virus would put my daughter at extreme risk of hospitalisation."

She has been shielding throughout the pandemic and her siblings decided to do home schooling during this time to keep her safe.

"I do not see a way for us to return to any normal way of living as it feels we have been shamed by much of society and Government," her mother added.

"A society that once protected and supported us we are now just a reminder of a life in lockdown as people are desperate to return to their lives and turn a blind eye to the many families like ours.

"It feels as time goes on it will be harder and riskier to return to regular living, not just because of Covid but because of the increase in childhood infections such as mumps and measles and and the rhetoric that people believe to carry on normally."

The mother added that there are millions of people affected by having a vulnerable loved-one.

The Government is expected to publish a national vaccine strategy which moves towards a proactive approach to vaccination aims to protect the country from future public health threats and against existing vaccine preventable diseases, especially respiratory illnesses. This was first set out in 2019 but was usurped by the Covid pandemic.

The fall in childhood immunisation is not just an issue at home. Professor Beate Kampmann, Director of The Vaccine Centre at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, warned that the international picture for measles coverage is "even worse" than in 2019 before the pandemic when several countries – including the UK, Ukraine and Madagascar – experienced outbreaks.

"We are currently seeing the largest increase in unvaccinated children in 20 years and the surveillance programs are also affected," she told i.

Globally, more than 30 million young kids have missed their first dose of measles vaccine in 2020 alone a recipe for outbreaks."

The figures come from a 2021 report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund and Immunisation Alliance. It found that during 2020, more than 22 million infants missed their first dose of a measles vaccine – three million more than in 2019.

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The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) launched a renewed campaign at the beginning of February, urging parents to ensure their children are up to date with the MMR jab and all other routine childhood immunisations.

Parents were reminded that they can contact the NHS continued to provide routine childhood immunisations.

Clinically vulnerable children 'put at risk' by lower vaccination rates

Campaigners for families of clinically vulnerable children want to reiterate the increased risk for immunosuppressed children and families.

Anita Amore, a spokesperson for Clinically Vulnerable Families, said: "An increase in communicable diseases normally controlled by vaccination, especially airborne ones such as whooping cough and measles, would increase the risk to all but in particular to children and parents with a compromised immune system including pregnant women and their unborn children and newborns.

"Those for whom vaccines are not suitable rely on indirect protection or herd immunity from the UK's normally excellent vaccine uptake."

She said that once uptake drops below the critical threshold, infections will spread in communities.

"Prior to the successful introduction of the MenC vaccination programme in 1999 schools and nurseries would often be temporarily closed if a child fell ill with meningitis.

"This situation further highlights the importance of addressing the quality of air in schools and offices and the need to monitor and clean it."

But Professor Bedford argued more needs to be done to promote it. Officials said they are working closely with the NHS and primary care to ensure childhood vaccinations continue to be prioritised and to catch-up children who have missed out during the pandemic.

"The UK has one of the most comprehensive routine childhood and adolescent immunisation programmes in the world and yet UKHSA collect only monitors uptake," Dr Vanessa Saliba, Consultant Epidemiologist at UKHSA told i.

"Since 2013 there has been a year-on-year slow decline in the uptake of childhood immunisations which had started to be reversed before the Covid-19 pandemic.

She confirmed disruption caused by the pandemic has been "the main driver for the fall seen over the past two years".

Dr Saliba said: "Measles is the most dangerous and most infectious against infectious diseases such as measles with the risk of outbreaks occurring," she added.

"We are raising awareness of the importance of childhood vaccinations with the public, working with MMR campaign encouraging parents and carers to check that their children are up to date and to take up the offer of routine vaccines at the right time."