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Mock measles outbreak shows result of spotty immunizations

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PITTSBURG — Maleika Rogers, 4, had bright orange spots all over her face Thursday. She looked contagious.

But although Maleika was at the county's public health clinic in Pittsburg, she wasn't sick. She was just part of a statewide "mock measles" day.

If Maleika really had the measles, she would have had a rash, fever, cough and watery eyes. She could even have been hospitalized and at risk of death.

The county Health Services Department staged the fake outbreak to illustrate the importance of receiving immunizations to prevent sickness.

Contra Costa had an estimated 1996 immunization rate of only 60 percent of 2-year-old children. Organizers hoped the fake measles epidemic would convince more parents to bring

their kids in for shots.

Because immunizations have virtually eliminated diseases like polio, diphtheria and small pox, many parents think more common maladies like measles have been eradicated.

But a measles outbreak infected at least 155 Contra Costa residents in 1990-91, including 45 babies. Some infants were hospitalized and two people died.

"Many people aren't aware of how contagious measles is," said Dottie Langthorn, county immunization coordinator. "It's in the air even when someone leaves the room."

Maleika can understand why kids do not show up for shots. She tries to get out of injections, "because it hurts," she said.

To urge parents to send kids in for shots and boosters, county officials have implemented several programs over the years, including a

door-to-door effort to spread the word about free shots offered around town.

At the county's Pittsburg clinic at 550 School St., immunizations are offered from 2 to 4 p.m. weekdays and 6 to 8 p.m. the first Wednesday of every month. The shots are free for children under 5. For older kids, the cost is \$7, but not more than \$13 for an entire family. The fee can be waived for low-income people.

"I know a lot of kids who are behind" in their shots, said Katrice McEachin, who volunteered with her daughter to be part of the mock measles outbreak. "I think their parents really don't understand the importance of it. Luckily, they have to have it to get into school."

In California, 42 percent of children are still behind in their shots on their second birthday. The state is trying to reduce it to only 10 percent by the year 2000.

Older children have to have shots to attend school and are almost always up to date.



HASSUAN JACKSON of Pittsburg, 21 months, wears stickers on her face to represent measles in a mock measles outbreak.

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