

Knox Public Health

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Remember the measles outbreak: Cancel church services

With the emphasis on social distancing and a limit on mass gathering as precautions for COVID-19, Holy Week presents a special challenge because of additional church services and the significance of Easter Sunday which is usually one of the largest attended services at most churches.

Local health officials as well as Gov. Mike DeWine have advised all churches to cancel traditional Holy Week services and instead conduct services online or at drive-in gatherings where parishioners stay in their vehicles while listening to the sermon.

Knox County officials are especially mindful of how the religious holiday can impact a disease outbreak. It was just six years ago that Easter Sunday services in the Knox County Amish community spurred an outbreak of measles. At the time, it was the largest outbreak of measles in 20 years affecting more than 200 individuals.

In 2014, a single Amish man who had just returned from a missionary trip to the Philippines where there was a nationwide measles outbreak, unknowingly brought the disease back to the community. With measles being highly communicable, and much of Amish community not being immunized for measles, the disease spread quickly.

The good news though, was that there was a vaccine available to prevent the measles, and health officials immunized thousands of Amish throughout Ohio including over 1,000 in Knox County. The willingness of the Amish to be immunized played a big part in stopping the outbreak, but social distancing was part of the messaging at the time. Many Amish, who conduct weekly church services in their homes, stopped doing so and other gatherings like livestock auctions were cancelled.

“With COVID-19, there is no vaccine, so the limitations on mass gatherings and social distancing are key to slowing the spread of the disease,” said Knox County Health Commissioner Julie Miller. “During an outbreak, huge gatherings like church services are a big risk to everyone’s health - the individual, their family and friends, coworkers, the community.”

During one of his recent daily press conferences, DeWine said “Any pastor who brings people together in close proximity to each other, a large group of people, is making a huge mistake. It is not a Christian thing to do. It is not in the Judeo-Christian tradition to hurt people and I’m sure no one intends to do that. But, by bringing people together you are risking their health, you are risking your health, you are risking total strangers’ health. This is just a huge, huge mistake.”

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