

More children to be protected from deadly viruses

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New changes to the GP contract will help protect thousands more children across the country from deadly and highly infectious diseases.

- Additional support for GPs will help protect children from life-threatening diseases, particularly in areas with low vaccination rates
- Changes could help reduce the risk and number of outbreaks such as in Enfield, where there are 50 confirmed cases of measles and children hospitalised
- GPs to work with families of unvaccinated children to help protect them and other children

Thousands more children across the country could be protected from deadly and highly infectious diseases under changes to the GP contract.

The updated contract for 2026 to 2027 - due to be unveiled this week - includes additional help for GPs to save young lives and shield families from preventable illness by strengthening vaccination delivery where it is needed most.

The move should help reduce outbreaks such as the current one in Enfield, where dozens of unvaccinated children have contracted measles and in the worst cases find themselves in hospital fighting a serious but preventable disease.

Under the current system, only those GP practices hitting high vaccination rate targets earn additional incentive payments.

Practices in communities with lower vaccination rates - and which need the assistance most - are often missing out on earning these additional payments even when they are making massive strides and recording year-on-year improvements in vaccination rates.

At the same time, the UK has lost its World Health Organization (WHO) measles elimination status - after over 2,900 cases of measles were confirmed in England in 2024, the highest level recorded in decades.

And childhood vaccination rates are well below the 95% WHO uptake target needed to prevent measles outbreaks - and are falling.

The next GP contract will help change this by providing improvement incentives that recognise those practices making progress. These additional resources can then be used to reinvest in outreach and to follow-up with families with unvaccinated children.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Wes Streeting, said:

Vaccinations are safe and they save lives. The return of diseases we thought we'd defeated, with children in hospital as a result, is entirely preventable.

With our investment and modernisation in general practice, GPs will be backed to protect children and prevent the risk of further outbreaks like we've seen in Enfield.

Every child deserves a healthy, happy start to life.

These improvement payments will give GPs the resources they need to help parents to protect children who are currently missing out and reduce health inequalities that leave some babies at far greater risk than others simply because of where they live.

Embedding vaccination delivery at the heart of the GP contract is expected to increase uptake in high-risk communities, helping to stop outbreaks before they start and keeping children out of hospital.

The updated contract will also match childhood vaccination incentives for GPs with the latest national vaccine schedule.

Ruth Rankine, Director of the Primary Care Network and Neighbourhood Lead at the NHS Confederation and NHS Providers, said:

Primary care leaders welcome this announcement and see it as a fair and supportive approach for general practice, particularly for those working in communities with high levels of unmet need. Increasing childhood vaccination uptake can be challenging, especially in areas where coverage has fallen and the risk of outbreaks has risen, so additional support for practices to work with families will be vital in helping protect babies and children from serious, preventable diseases.

We are particularly supportive of recognising meaningful improvement rather than relying solely on absolute thresholds. This is a more realistic and constructive way to encourage progress, given the very real challenges many practices face, including workforce pressures and higher levels of vaccine hesitancy in some communities. Extending improvement-based incentives more widely would help ensure practices are supported to build trust with families and increase uptake over time.

General practice plays a crucial role in safeguarding children's health, and primary care leaders are committed to working with communities to reduce inequalities in vaccination coverage and protect more children from life-threatening illnesses.

The NHS's vaccination programme was expanded on 1 January to include chickenpox (also known as varicella) for the first time to help protect hundreds of thousands of young children from getting seriously ill.

GP practices started to offer children a combined measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) vaccine at 12 months and 18 months of age to add chickenpox to the protections against measles, mumps and rubella.

GP quality indicators will be updated to include the delivery of the combined MMRV vaccine.

This removes unnecessary complexity for practices and ensures they are fairly rewarded as MMRV is rolled out.

Children are not the only people to benefit from changes to the GP contract.

Primary care networks will be required to identify care home residents with overdue or outstanding

routine vaccinations. The contract will also allow for greater flexibility in how practices collaborate to deliver flu and COVID-19 vaccines.

By embedding vaccination delivery into the contract we expect increased uptake in high-risk populations.

The GP contract 2026 to 2027 will also reflect the extension of the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccination programme to all adults aged 80 and over and all residents in care homes for older adults, in addition to existing cohorts, from April. GP practices are required to offer the RSV vaccination to eligible patients as an essential service.

A new £2 million pilot will also see health visitors reach families facing barriers to vaccines, to ensure more children are protected.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/more-children-to-be-protected-from-deadly-viruses>