Questions and answers about measles

From the Arizona Department of Health Services

What is measles?
Measles is an acute, highly communicable illness caused by the measles virus. Before the routine vaccination program was introduced in the United States, measles was a common illness in infants, children and young adults. Because most people have now been vaccinated, measles has become a rare disease in the United States. Consequently, the illness is rarely found in Arizona.

What are the symptoms of measles?
The major symptom associated with measles is the rash. This rash generally starts on the head and slowly spreads down the rest of the body. Other symptoms include high fever, cough, runny nose, and red, watery eyes. These symptoms last about a week.

Where is the measles virus found?
The only known hosts for the measles virus are humans.

How do people become infected with the measles virus?
Measles is a highly contagious disease that is transmitted by direct contact with infectious droplets or, less commonly, by airborne spread. Measles virus may survive for up to 2 hours on environmental surfaces.

Who is at risk for acquiring measles?
Anyone who is not immune from either a previous measles infection or from vaccination can get measles. Before the routine vaccination program was introduced in the United States, measles was a common illness in infants, children and young adults. Because most people have been vaccinated, measles is now a rare disease in the United States.

Is measles contagious?
Yes, measles is highly contagious. When someone with measles sneezes or coughs they can spray infected droplets into the air. These droplets can remain suspended in the air for periods as long as two hours until they are breathed in by someone else, or they may fall out of the air and land on various surfaces. Anyone who touches these surfaces after they have become contaminated and then puts their fingers in their nose or mouth may become infected.

How is measles diagnosed?
A diagnosis of measles requires the detection of measles virus or IgM antibodies to measles virus in a clinical specimen such as a nasopharyngeal swab or blood. Laboratory testing should be arranged by contacting your local health department.

What are some of the complications associated with measles?
The disease can be severe, with the most frequent complications being diarrhea, middle ear infection, and pneumonia. Encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain, frequently resulting in permanent brain damage, occurs in about 1 per 1000-2000 cases of measles. The risk of severe complications and death is higher among children younger than 5 and adults older than 20 years of age.

What is the treatment for measles?
There is no treatment for measles that targets the infection directly. Available treatments are directed at taking care of the symptoms and any complications.

If someone becomes very ill, they should seek medical attention immediately. If someone seeks medical attention, they should call their doctor in advance so the doctor can take appropriate precautions at their office to ensure they don’t spread the virus to other vulnerable people. Campus Health Services is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and
from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesday. Immediately contact your health care provider or go to an urgent care facility if Campus Health Services is closed.

What can be done to prevent the spread of measles?
The measles vaccine (usually MMR), is the best way to prevent measles. Other things people can do to prevent measles and other infections are to thoroughly wash their hands often with soap, and to teach children to wash their hands too. Eating utensils should not be shared, and surfaces that are frequently touched (toys, doorknobs, tables, counters, etc.) should be regularly cleaned with soap and water, or with cleaning wipes.

Is there a vaccine available, and where can I get it?
Measles can be prevented with the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine. The vaccine is available at Campus Health Services during business hours from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesday. The cost is $75, and is covered by most insurance providers. Students can put the vaccine on their LOUIE account; they do not need to pay at the time of service. Contact the Coconino County Health Department if you are uninsured and cannot afford the vaccine.

Is the vaccination safe? Are there any adverse side effects?
Visit the Centers for Disease Control website for more information on the vaccine and possible side effects.

Isn’t the vaccine mandated by NAU and if so, how can there be a case of measles?
To ensure the health of the entire student population, we require verification of immunity to measles—also known as rubella—for all students born after December 31, 1956. Before a student can register, they are required to show proof of measles (rubella) vaccinations or a lab test showing proof of immunity to the measles (rubella). A student can be waived from this requirement according to the State of Arizona if they provide a waiver form and medical documentation of an allergy to the components of the vaccine or of a physical condition that prohibits vaccination.

Has there been a case of measles at NAU?
NAU has not experienced a case of measles at this time.

Where do I get more information?
For information, visit the Campus Health Services website or the national Centers for Disease Control website. NAU also has set up a temporary call center which can be reached at (928) 523-0007.