
Remarks By Honourable Vincent Wheatley Minister For Health And Social Development For Vaccination Week In The Americas 2025

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A pleasant good day and greetings to the people of these beautiful Virgin Islands. I am Honourable Vincent O. Wheatley, Minister for Health and Social Development.

Today, I am extremely happy to officially launch Vaccination Week in the Americas 2025, under the theme *"Your Decision Makes a Difference: Immunisation for All."*

This annual campaign is more than just a calendar event. It is both a call to action and a reminder that vaccines protect lives, prevent illness, and help ensure that our children, families, and communities can thrive. Vaccines remain one of the most impactful tools we have to reduce the burden of disease and promote health for all since their introduction.

Despite this fact, we continue to face the growing challenge of vaccine hesitancy and misinformation, not only at home, but across the world. Misleading and false claims continue to circulate, particularly on social media, creating confusion, fear, and mistrust. This misinformation poses a serious risk to public health and undermines decades of progress.

Because of the growing number of people who no longer see the benefit of vaccination, there has been a resurgence of measles. Measles is a disease that was largely under control for decades. Countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Romania, and parts of Africa and Asia have reported significant outbreaks since last year. Even in our CARICOM region, we have seen imported cases, which reminds us that diseases do not respect borders.

We must work together to ensure that our measles vaccination coverage remains high, particularly among children. Measles is not a harmless childhood illness. The reality is measles is a highly contagious disease that can lead to serious complications, including pneumonia, brain inflammation, and even death. We must ensure that our Territory's children vaccine coverage is maintained at a high level to prevent an outbreak. It is the best defence we have.

We must also remember that vaccination during pregnancy plays a vital role in protecting both mothers and their babies. The influenza vaccine and the tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis (Tdap) vaccine are recommended during pregnancy to prevent severe illness in mothers and provide early protection for new-borns. We strongly encourage expectant mothers to speak with their healthcare providers and ensure they are properly vaccinated.

By now, you might be thinking that if you are not a child or an expectant mother, vaccination is not for you. Persons with chronic conditions and the elderly are also vulnerable and can be assisted by the coverage provided by vaccines. The threat of seasonal influenza and future pandemic respiratory diseases puts our vulnerable population at high risk, but a measure of protection can be reached through timely vaccination.

Equally important is the role of our health system in early detection and response. I want to remind all healthcare providers and clinics of their legal responsibility under the Infectious Disease Notification Act, to promptly report all suspected or confirmed notifiable diseases to the Ministry of Health and Social Development's Public Health Unit. Timely and accurate reporting allows us to take quick action to prevent further spread and protect the wider community. Disease surveillance is a cornerstone of our national health security, and your diligence is essential.

We also want to remind our healthcare workers that you are on the frontlines of public health. Your role not only places you at higher risk of exposure, but it also gives you the opportunity to set an example for the wider community. We urge all clinical and support staff to be current with vaccines such as MMR, influenza, and hepatitis B.

As Minister for Health and Social Development, I want to assure you that we remain steadfast in our efforts to protect the health of The Virgin Islands. We will continue to invest in vaccination, expand access, and strengthen public trust in science and in our health system.

This year's Vaccination Week Observance is being coordinated locally by the BVI Health Services Authority through its Community Health Services team, with support from the Ministry of Health and Social Development and in collaboration with the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO).

Throughout this week, our teams will be hosting a range of activities including school outreach, medical education sessions, media programmes, and community engagement events to promote immunisation and encourage informed decision-making.

So now is the time to get your child vaccinated and keep them up to date on their vaccination schedule. The decision to be vaccinated truly makes a difference for ourselves, our children, and the generations to come.

Together, let us keep The Virgin Islands strong, safe, and healthy — with vaccination continuing to play a vital role in achieving that goal.

Thank you.