

# Unprotected People #87

## Measles

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### Open Letter to Parents from Eileen M. Ouellette, M.D., J.D., F.A.A.P., Former President of the American Academy of Pediatrics (2005-2006)

*According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, measles is a highly infectious viral illness that can cause severe pneumonia, encephalitis, and death. Although an effective vaccine has been available since 1963, millions of measles cases and nearly half a million measles deaths occur annually worldwide. In the United States, ongoing measles transmission has been eliminated because of high levels of vaccination among children.*

*In this personal account, Dr. Ouellette vividly describes her own experience with measles infection in 1937. As an eight-year-old girl, she suffered for days with an extremely high fever from measles. Here is her story:*

Dear Parents,

I was alone on a small mattress on a very stormy sea with enormous waves surging over me. A large whale kept trying to board the mattress to devour me.

I was eight years old and had the measles and a fever of over 105°F. My memories of that time are hazy, but 60 years later I still remember the terror of that repetitive delusion and visual hallucination. My parents later told me that I kept screaming for several days as my fever remained above 105°F, and I described what I thought I was experiencing. It was 20 years later when I became a pediatric resident that I realized I had endured central nervous system complications of measles and was very lucky to have escaped with no permanent damage.

At its peak in the United States (before measles vaccine became available in 1963), there were more than 494,000 cases of measles in one year. Measles killed 3,000 children and resulted in 48,000 hospitalizations annually. In 2002, thanks to immunizations, there were 44 cases of measles reported in the United States.

Most parents, and many grandparents, have no personal experience of seeing children suffer from these severe childhood illnesses: diphtheria, whooping cough, polio, mumps, chickenpox, and *H. influenzae* meningitis. Consequently, they may not appreciate the seriousness of these diseases or wrongly believe they no longer exist.

It is vital that we continue to immunize our children against these preventable diseases or else they will return. Each of these diseases, after all, is just a plane ride away.

Unfortunately, there is much misinformation about vaccines, some of it on the Internet. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) website for parents, [www.cisimmunize.org](http://www.cisimmunize.org), provides you with accurate information about immunizations. AAP encourages you to discuss any questions you may have with your pediatrician or other healthcare professional.

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