

As US measles cases rise, biotech firms start developing new treatments

Antivirals could also be used as a strategy to treat measles, although they tend to be short-lived and must often be given very soon after a person is infected or starts to develop symptoms to be effective. Researchers at Georgia State University identified an oral antiviral drug and tested it in rats, ferrets, and dogs infected with related viruses in the orthoparamyxovirus subfamily since these animals don't get human measles. The drug lowered viral load and all treated animals survived. It has not yet been tested in people.

A challenge in antiviral development is that drugs toxic enough to kill viruses often have unpleasant side effects for people.

The big question, though, is if people will use the treatments being developed or allow their children to take them. While anti-vaccine sentiment is driving the current outbreaks, Mina of Invivyd hopes people who have not vaccinated their children or gotten the vaccine themselves will be open to getting a monoclonal antibody because "this is a molecule that our bodies create naturally."

But during the Utah measles outbreak, some parents have refused to let doctors give their children immune globulin, a broad mix of antibodies derived from donated plasma. And anti-science sentiment has become more mainstream with Robert F. Kennedy Jr. leading the Department of Health and Human Services, where he has cast doubt on vaccines, treatments for depression, and other established medical treatments.

That doesn't mean researching antibodies and other treatments for measles isn't worth the effort, though, particularly given the potential to help populations who are unable to be vaccinated. Crowe says it's important that work on measles treatments gets funded as vaccination rates continue to decline.

"I think there's going to be hundreds of thousands of cases," he says. "People are going to die. There's some urgency to finishing this work."

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