

Jump in measles cases linked to vaccine fears

Physicians boost education efforts

By Mike Stobbe
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Measles cases in the United States are at the highest level in more than a decade, with nearly half of those involving children whose parents rejected vaccination, health officials reported yesterday.

Doctors are troubled by

the trend fueled by unfounded fears that vaccines may cause autism. The number of cases is still small, just 131, but that's only for the first seven months of the year. There were only 42 cases for all of last year.

"We're seeing a lot more spread. That is concerning to us," said Dr. Jane Seward of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Pediatricians are frustrated, saying they are having to spend more time convincing

parents the shot is safe.

"This year, we certainly have had parents asking more questions," said Dr. Ari Brown of Austin, Texas, who is a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Measles, best known for a red skin rash, is a potentially deadly, highly infectious virus that spreads through contact with a sneezing, coughing, infected person.

In a typical year, only one outbreak occurs in the United States, infecting perhaps

10 to 20 people. Through July 30 the country has seen seven outbreaks, including one in Illinois with 30 cases, this year, said Seward, of the CDC's Division of Viral Diseases.

None of the 131 patients died, but 15 were hospitalized.

Childhood measles vaccination rates have stayed above 92 percent, according to 2006 data. However, the recent outbreaks suggest potential pockets of unvaccinated children are forming.

Health officials worry that vaccination rates have begun to fall — something that won't show up in the data for a couple of years.

The Academy of Pediatrics has made educating parents about the safety of vaccines one of its top priorities this year. That's partly because busy doctors have grown frustrated by the amount of time they're spending answering parents' questions about things they read on the Internet or heard from TV talk shows.

Questions commonly center on autism and the fear that it can be caused by the measles shots or by a mercury-based preservative that used to be in most vaccines. Health officials say there is no scientific proof either is a cause.

Also, since 2001, the preservative has been removed from shots recommended for young children, and it was never in the measles-mumps-rubella combination vaccine. It can still be found in some flu shots.