



VACCINE EXEMPTIONS

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) supports immunizations for infants, children, adolescents and adults as defined by recommendations set forth in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. With the exception of policies allowing for refusal due to a documented allergy or medical contraindication, the AAFP does not support immunization exemption policies.

The Importance of Vaccines

CDC statistics demonstrate dramatic declines in vaccine-preventable diseases when compared with the pre-vaccine era.ⁱ Immunizations are among the most cost-effective and successful public health interventions. Due to the high morbidity and mortality associated with most vaccine-preventable diseases and the safety, effectiveness, and savings offered by vaccines, all states and the District of Columbia have laws that require proof of immunization for school enrollment. However, families have historically obtained exemptions from vaccinations under different rationales: medical, religious, and philosophical.

Immunization Rates

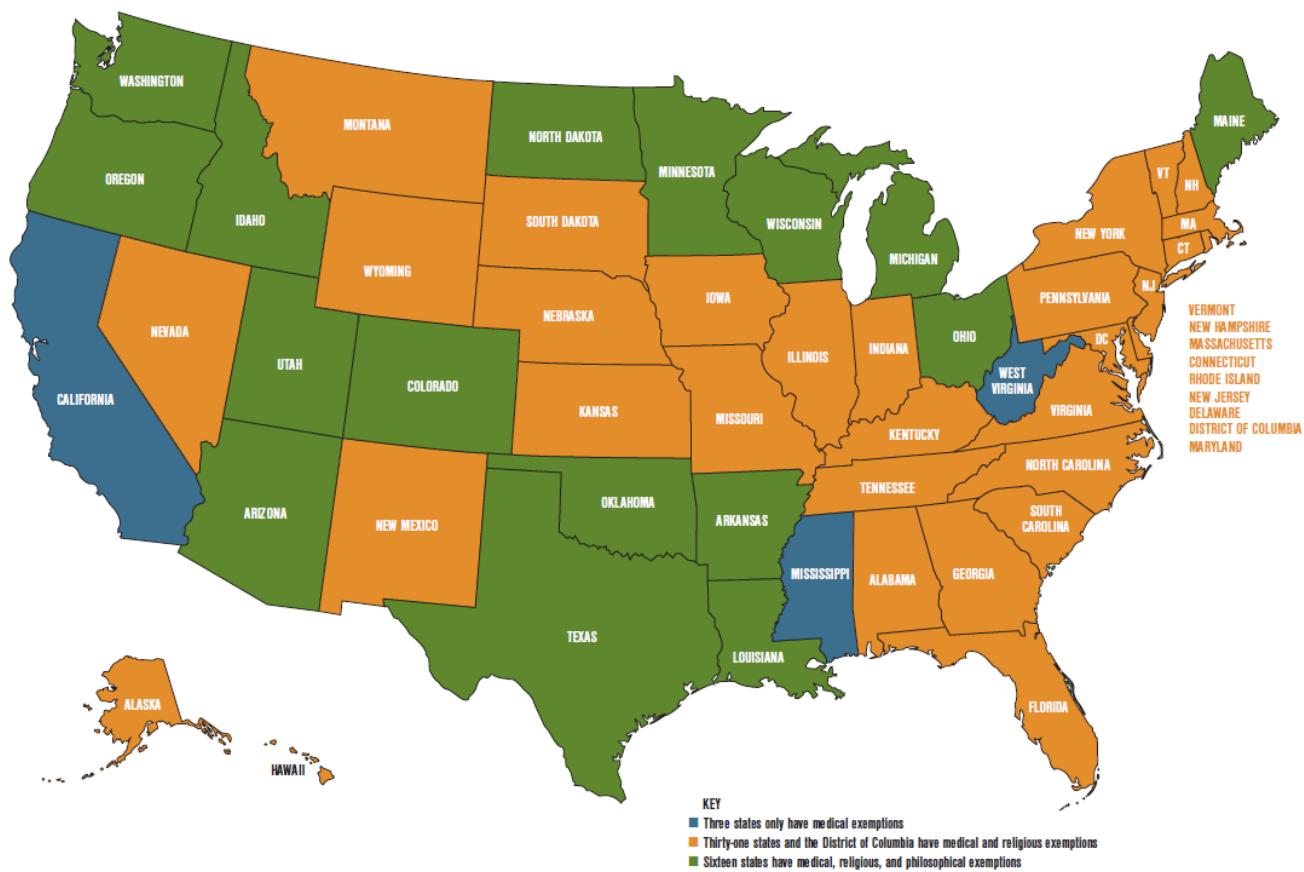
As demonstrated by the 2014-15 vaccination statistics, many children are receiving immunizations, leading to high rates of immunization for the child population. Mississippi has the highest immunization rates in the country. For the 2014-15 academic year, Mississippi reported that nearly all of its 44,129 kindergarten students had been adequately immunized; and the state's measles, mumps and rubella vaccination rate was about five percentage points higher than the national median of 94% percent.ⁱⁱ For kindergartners that year, Mississippi approved just 17 medical exemptions. Idaho, in comparison, had the highest level of vaccine exemptions with 68 medical exemptions, 147 religious exemptions, and 1,295 philosophical exemptions. There are 11 states (AK, AZ, CO, ID, ME, MI, OR, UT, VT, WA, and WI) that reported 4% of its kindergarteners claimed exemptions.

State Immunization Exemptions

All 50 states allow for medical exemptions, which are an exception to immunization mandates based upon a medical condition. Most providers follow the CDC federal vaccine recommendations, outlining what is and is not considered a medical contraindication to vaccination. There are currently 47 states and the District of Columbia that allow religious exemptions for childhood vaccines. A religious exemption can arise from statutory provisions granting parents the right to forego vaccination for their child if vaccination would violate their sincere religious belief. Additionally, 16 states authorize philosophical exemptions. A philosophical exemption broadens statutory language allowing religious exemption, granting an exemption to a vaccine mandate based on "a personal belief opposed to immunization"ⁱⁱⁱ or "conscientiously held beliefs of the parent or guardian."^{iv}

Families who claim exemptions from immunization mandates for any reason are at increased risk of developing a vaccine-preventable disease. In fact, children in families who have been granted a vaccine exemption are more than 35 times likely to contract measles^v and nearly six times more likely to contract pertussis^{vi}. In addition, persons who claim philosophical or religious exemptions create risk for their community because unvaccinated or under-vaccinated persons can transmit disease. The

Institute for Vaccine Safety found that states with relaxed exemption policies had approximately 50% more cases of whooping cough compared to states with stricter immunization laws.^{vii}



Legislative Activity

In recent years, laws modifying vaccine exemptions have increased. In 2015, six states enacted legislation; and in 2016 two states enacted legislation. One of the biggest successes for immunization advocates occurred in California on June 30, 2015, when Governor Jerry Brown (D) signed into law a bill that eliminated the state's religious and philosophical exemptions. This law went into effect July 1, 2016 and arose partly from the aftermath of a 2015 measles outbreak in California. The outbreak resulted in a significant multi-state outbreak that sickened 147 people in the US, including 131 in California. Many who were affected were not immunized against measles. Also in 2015, Vermont repealed its philosophical exemption, and currently allows for medical and religious exemptions only. In 2016, Delaware passed a bill which would require that parents who file for the religious exemption from immunizations be made aware of the possibility of a temporary exclusion from school for their child in the event of an epidemic of a vaccine preventable disease. Minnesota also passed a bill that would extend the school immunization requirements and exemption criteria to its prekindergarten program.

ⁱ Immunization Action Coalition. Retrieved from <http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4037.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Seithree R, etc. Vaccination Coverage Among Children in Kindergarten – United States, 2014-2015 School Year. CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. 2015; 64(33):897-904 Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6433a2.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Utah Code Ann. § 53 A-11-301, 302

^{iv} Minn. Stat. § 121A.15

^v Salmon DA, etc. Health consequences of religious and philosophical exemptions from immunization laws: individual and societal risk of measles. JAMA.1999;282:47-53. Retrieved from <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=190649>

^{vi} Feikin DR, etc. Individual and Community Risks of Measles and Pertussis Associated With Personal Exemptions to Immunization. JAMA 2000;284:3145-3150. Retrieved from <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=193407>

^{vii} Omer SB (2006).Nonmedical exemptions to school immunization requirements: secular trends and association of state policies with pertussis incidence. JAMA 2006;296(14):1757-63. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17032989>