

Immunization Facts

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I don't know of any child or adult who likes to go to the doctor for shots. There is just something about a needle that makes old and young alike a little apprehensive. However, when a child enrolls in a public school, the parent is required to submit documentation of several things including a record of immunizations against specific childhood diseases such as measles, mumps, and whooping cough.

All 50 states require vaccinations for children entering public schools, but in recent years this has become a controversial topic. Although most states, including Georgia, offer medical and religious exemptions from the immunization requirement, some public health officials maintain that unvaccinated children present a risk to the general population and that these exemptions should be eliminated. School children in Georgia, as well as many other states, can be withdrawn from school by school officials if their immunizations are not up to date and there is no exemption on file with the school system.

Georgia Department of Public Health Rules and Regulations for Schools and Childcare Facilities state that "Except as otherwise provided, immunization against the following diseases shall be required of all children entering a school or childcare facility operating in the state: diphtheria, haemophilus influenzae type B (not required on or after the fifth birthday), hepatitis A, hepatitis B, measles, meningitis, mumps, pertussis, pneumococcal (not required on or after the fifth birthday), poliomyelitis, rubella (German measles), tetanus, and varicella (chickenpox)."

With the increase in number of childhood diseases once thought to be under control, many states are trying to limit allowable exemptions from the law. California recently tightened rules on how a child can be exempted from school-required immunizations by making it more difficult to obtain an exemption. In 2010, a study published in the Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that there were more than 9,000 cases of whooping cough (also known as pertussis) in the state of California alone. Before immunizations for whooping cough, it was the leading cause of death in children. Records show that in 1934, there were more than 265,000 cases of pertussis but in 1974 immunization had stopped the disease at 1,010 cases. The group that did the study found that children were more than 2½ times more likely to contract whooping cough in California because of the large number of children who are not immunized.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends getting 28 doses of 10 vaccines for children aged 0 to six. Opponents to immunization requirements say a child's immune system can handle most infections naturally. They question the benefits of introducing vaccines into a healthy child's body versus the possible side effects. They point to studies that indicate immunizations may lead to autism, ADHD, and diabetes.

Supporters of vaccines, including many in the medical field, express their opinion that vaccinations are safe and have saved thousands of children from disease and possible death while protecting the health of other children. They say that although adverse reactions to immunizations may occur, they are rare and that the benefits far outweigh the potential problems. In cases such as polio, vaccines have almost eliminated the disease in the United States. Vaccines may not completely prevent the disease, but if the child acquires the disease, the sickness is said to usually be less severe than it would be had the child not had the immunization.

No one would argue that thanks to vaccines many preventable diseases have become rare, but outbreaks still happen. For example, cases of measles have dramatically increased in recent years, and all 50 states reported an increase in the number of cases of whooping cough in 2014. Additionally, the CDC recorded a 24 percent increase in the total number of cases of whooping cough reported in 2013. Immunization supporters point to the children who are not immunized as the cause for the rise in the number of cases of disease.

Whether or not to immunize is ultimately the decision of the parents and their child's physician. For most children, however, making sure that all immunizations are up to date is the best way to ensure the child is protected from serious diseases that can cause long-term disabilities. Immunization is one of the best ways to protect our community.