



Preventing death and disease from vaccine-preventable diseases

Position: The West Virginia Immunization Network (WIN) strongly opposes any exemptions for immunizations other than for medical reasons. Non-medical exemptions result in a significant number of children going without needed immunizations to prevent diseases that can and do cause permanent injury and death.

Adopted February 10, 2006

What are Exemptions?

Medical exemptions are determined by a physician. These may occur when a child is allergic to some vaccine components or has an immune deficiency, such as occurs when being treated for cancer.

Religious exemptions are allowed when immunizations contradict the parent's sincere religious beliefs.

Philosophical exemptions refer to other non-religious beliefs held by the parents who do not believe that their child should be immunized.

Why WIN does not support non-medical exemptions

Immunizations have been one of the greatest achievements in medicine and public health, saving untold suffering and death, as well as financial resources.

Vaccine-preventable diseases can, and do, return when immunization levels decline. States that easily permit exemptions or offer philosophical exemptions have more children with exemptions and more outbreaks of pertussis. (*March 16, 2005; Congressional Testimony, Daniel Salmons, Ph.D, MPH*)

Exempt children pose a risk to other children who are too young to be vaccinated or have medical reasons contraindicating vaccination, such as children with cancer.

Given that nearly all of West Virginia is considered a healthcare provider shortage area, with a relative lack of pediatricians in most areas of the state, enacting new laws to allow for non-medical exemptions may create a climate in which parents claim exemptions as a matter of convenience, due to the vastness of the State's health care shortage areas and despite the best efforts of health care providers and public health officials to educate parents and raise awareness about the need for appropriate immunizations for children.

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Maintaining Adequate Vaccination Rates is important to reducing health care costs in West Virginia

- In the US, vaccination programs have eliminated or significantly reduced many vaccine-preventable diseases. However, these diseases still exist and can once again become common—and deadly—if vaccination coverage does not continue at high levels. (*CDC; National Immunization Program*)
- In the U.S., up to 20 percent of persons with measles are hospitalized. Seventeen percent of measles cases have had one or more complications, such as ear infections, pneumonia, or diarrhea. Pneumonia is present in about six percent of cases and accounts for most of the measles deaths. Although less common, some persons with measles develop encephalitis (swelling of the lining of the brain), resulting in brain damage.

Where are we?

- West Virginia's rate of children who are fully immunized by their second birthday is 86.6 % (the fifth highest in the nation), compared to a national average of 79%.
- The nation has experienced a 341% increase in rate of pertussis (whooping cough) since 2002 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Immunization Program)
- **West Virginia is one of two states with the strongest public health laws related to immunizations** - - current WV Code §16-3-4 does not allow for non-medical exemptions.
- **Allowing non-medical exemptions in WV would result in increased rates of vaccine-preventable diseases.**
- As of May 2004, all 50 states allow vaccination exemptions for medical reasons; 48 states allow exemptions for religious reasons; and 20 states allow exemptions for philosophical reasons. **Non-medical exemptions have resulted in increases in vaccine-preventable disease in Colorado** (*Pediatrics, July 2004*) **and Utah** (*JAMA, July 1999*).

WIN's position against allowing non-medical exemptions is supported on the national level by the following organizations:

- American Medical Association
- American Academy of Pediatrics

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