

IMMUNIZATIONS SAVE LIVES

Non-medical exemptions to immunizations can put entire communities at risk of dangerous, costly outbreaks



Vaccines are among the most effective means of preventing infectious diseases. Federal and professional guidelines recommend childhood, adolescent and adult immunizations to protect against a wide range of viral and bacterial infections whose consequences can include disease, permanent disabilities and death.

Public participation in immunization programs is critical to their effectiveness. “Herd immunity” depends on a high percentage of all people being vaccinated to prevent the spread of disease. This community-level immunity then helps protect individuals who cannot be immunized, such as newborns too young for certain vaccines or people with cancer or other conditions that weaken their immune systems.

Outbreaks of infectious diseases can have serious medical consequences. Rubella can cause stillbirth, miscarriage, or severe birth defects.¹ Measles is so contagious that 90% of unprotected people exposed to the virus will get sick.² Before widespread measles immunization, 3 to 4 million people got measles each year in the U.S. Pregnant women and infants and children under the age of five years are at high risk for severe illness and complications of measles.³

Infectious disease outbreaks are also costly. Public health officials may spend millions of dollars tracking down those exposed and offering immunizations. In 2011 alone, the public health cost of addressing dozens of measles outbreaks across the U.S. was estimated at \$2.7 to \$5.3 million.⁴

HIGHLIGHTS

- Vaccines are a safe, effective way to prevent dangerous infectious diseases.
- Herd immunity relies on a high percentage of people being immunized to prevent disease from spreading.
- Non-medical exemptions from immunization can result in loss of herd immunity in some communities, allowing disease to spread more readily.
- Outbreaks of highly infectious diseases like measles illustrate the need for all eligible people to be fully vaccinated on time.
- Public health agencies can spend millions of dollars in a single year addressing outbreaks.

Non-Medical Exemptions to Immunization Should Be Eliminated

March of Dimes supports efforts to increase immunization coverage and eliminate non-medical exemptions so that children, pregnant women, and all Americans are protected from vaccine-preventable diseases. The health and wellbeing of all communities depends on the collective immunity provided by high immunization rates.

1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Pregnancy and Rubella*. <https://www.cdc.gov/rubella/pregnancy.html>

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Measles: Make Sure Your Child Is Fully Immunized*. <https://www.cdc.gov/features/measles/>

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Measles: For Healthcare Professionals*. <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/hcp/index.html>

4 Ortega-Sanchez IR, Vijayaraghavan M, Barskey AE, Wallace GS. The economic burden of sixteen measles outbreaks on United States public health departments in 2011. *Vaccine*, 2014 Mar 5;32(11):1311-7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24135574>