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Which states allow religious exemption for vaccines

Although federal public health officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) make national vaccination policy recommendations, actual legislation regarding their enforcement is decided at the state level. This creates a state-to-state variance, which in turn impacts Americans’ decisions on whether or not to vaccinate themselves and their children. It also affects primary health care providers such as Nurse Practitioners, who are tasked with giving vaccinations and educating their patients on the vaccines. Individual states allow for various exemptions to vaccination requirements. Exemptions vary among states but can include medical, religious, and philosophical reasons.

Medical exemption: Typically, a medical exemption must be written by an MD or doctor of osteopathy (DO). However, some states allow other health care workers to certify that administering one or more of the state-mandated vaccinations would be detrimental to an individual’s health. Religious exemption: This exemption is based on the First Amendment, the right to freely hold and exercise religious beliefs. However, if the state can provide a compelling reason for vaccination, the exemption can be withdrawn. One such reason would be to prevent the spread of serious communicable diseases.Philosophical, conscientious, or personal belief exemption: This must include all vaccinations, not just one. In some states, parents seeking this type of exemption must do so in collaboration with an MD or other state-designated health care worker. In addition, they may be required to complete a state-provided vaccine education program. Parents who choose vaccination exemption for their children, are significantly more likely to believe “children get too many shots,” and fear serious side effects, such as autism. In the CDC’s many studies on vaccine safety, a direct correlation between vaccines and autism has yet to be demonstrated. Parents who choose to delay vaccination, or refuse it altogether, feel differently about the safety of vaccines than their vaccinating counterparts. According to the National Immunization Survey, when presented with the statement “vaccines are safe,” 84.9 percent of parents who chose to vaccinate agreed. In contrast, parents who had delayed or refused vaccinations for their children only agreed at a rate of 50.4 percent. Parents who delay vaccination, or choose vaccination exemption for their children also had different views on the effects their decision would have. One of the other statements parents were presented with was, “If I do not vaccinate my child, he/she may get a disease such as measles and cause other children or adults to also to get the disease.” Of parents who had vaccinated their children, 90 percent agreed with this statement. In the group of parents who had opted to delay or refuse vaccination, agreement dropped to 71 percent. Evidence suggests that higher rates of nonmedical exemptions are correlated with an increased incidence of vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs). Recent findings also indicate that the use of philosophical exemptions tend to occur in geographical clusters, leaving these communities at a greater risk of VPDs. The CDC notes that this grouping of exemptions is associated with higher risk in those areas for vaccine-preventable diseases, such as pertussis and measles. VPDs pose significant health risks to the unvaccinated, and primary care providers are ideally situated to explain those risks. The variance that exists in state-level vaccination exemptions adds complexity to an already controversial topic. Since the ability to create and regulate exemptions lies with the states, the CDC encourages states to “strengthen the rigor of the application process” for exemptions, and analyze their enforcement policies in an effort to limit the overuse of exemptions. While much of the responsibility for improving state vaccination rates falls on legislators, primary care providers are uniquely positioned to delivery trustworthy information concerning vaccines to their patients. The CDC recommends that primary care providers also exercise “stronger health care practices,” such as having conversations with parents and maintaining vaccination as the default option. Primary care providers have a responsibility to remain informed of their state’s vaccination policies and exemptions so they can provide clarity and evidence-based care to their patients. With increased collaboration between legislators, health care providers, parents, and communities, we can reduce the rates of vaccination exemptions and vaccine preventable diseases. Religious Exemption Philosophical Exemption Pending Legislation Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation Public schools in Arizona would be required to post the immunization rates of students under a bill introduced in the state’s house of representatives in February. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation Following a measles outbreak linked to visitors and employees at Disneyland -- an outbreak that has infected at least 130 in California alone -- state legislators in February introduced a measure to end the state’s personal belief exemption. The bill would also require school districts to inform parents of the immunization rates at their children’s schools. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation A bill introduced in the Connecticut House in March would force any parent hoping to secure a religious exemption for their child to first have their request for the exemption be notarized. Parents would also have to review instructional material from the state “regarding the risks to such child and to others of ... failing to receive adequate immunizations.” Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation A proposal in Illinois would reshape the state’s religious exemption by requiring any parent seeking a faith-based waiver to complete a Department of Public Health objection form, and include a notarized signature from a "religious official attesting to a bona fide religious objection.” The bill also requires the state board of education to publish on its website the exemption data it receives from schools. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation One bill in Maine would amend the state’s philosophical exemption by requiring parents first receive a signed letter from their doctor certifying that they have reviewed “the risks and benefits of immunization.” A separate bill would do away with the philosophical exemption altogether. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation Just two states -- Mississippi and West Virginia -- do not have a religious exemption on the books. Maryland would join the two if a proposal to repeal the state’s current exemption for religion is approved. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation Twin bills in the Minnesota legislature would eliminate the state’s conscientious belief exemption and replace it with a personal belief exemption. To win one, a parent would need to obtain a certificate of exemption that includes a statement from a physician verifying that they have reviewed information about “the risks and benefits” of vaccination. Religious Exemption No Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation House Bill 130 in Mississippi was designed to establish guidelines for claiming a conscientious belief exemption, but the measure failed to advance through the legislature. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation House Bill 846 in Missouri requires that parents be notified if any student at their child’s school has not been immunized. A separate proposal would extend the notification requirement to parents with a child in preschool, nursery school or a daycare center. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation A New Jersey bill would tighten the state’s exemption law by making it harder for parents to mask philosophical objections behind protections in place for those seeking a religious waiver. Under the bill, parents hoping to secure a religious exemption must first obtain a notarized letter explaining “the nature of the person’s religious tenet or practice that is implicated by the vaccination and how the administration of the vaccine would violate, contradict or otherwise be inconsistent with that tenet or practice.” Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation The Philosophical Exemption to Immunizations Act in New York, introduced in the state assembly a lawmaker whose son has autism, would add a personal belief waiver to the state’s existing religious exemption. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation In North Carolina, a bill introduced in March would repeal the state’s current religious exemption. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation Texas lawmakers have introduced more than a dozen bills limiting personal belief exemptions and mandating the release of more data on vaccination rates in schools. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation A bill moving through the Vermont House would repeal the state’s religious and philosophical exemptions while a separate measure in the senate would do away with the philosophical exemption only. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation A bill in Washington would maintain the state’s religious exemption, but no longer allow parents to skip vaccinations for their children on the basis of personal or philosophical objection. The measure cleared a House committee in February but has yet to advance further. Religious Exemption No Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation The state legislature has passed a bill that would update immunization requirements and require families seeking exemptions to sign an affidavit affirming their beliefs. Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption Yes Pending Legislation None Religious Exemption Yes Philosophical Exemption No Pending Legislation None

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