

# Vaccine Exemptions in Texas

## What Physicians Need to Know

Overall, vaccine coverage remains high for the required vaccines in child care centers and schools. However, the number of immunization exemptions has been growing. This is attributable in part to vaccine safety concerns, despite years of validated scientific data finding vaccines are safe with few side effects. In Texas, individuals with medical contraindications or personal belief concerns are allowed to request an exemption from immunization requirements. It's important for physicians to be able to address questions patients may have on Texas' vaccine exemption process.

### School Exemptions

Texas law allows an exemption from immunization requirements for children in licensed child care facilities, K-12 schools, and colleges and universities.

#### 1. To claim an exemption for medical reasons:

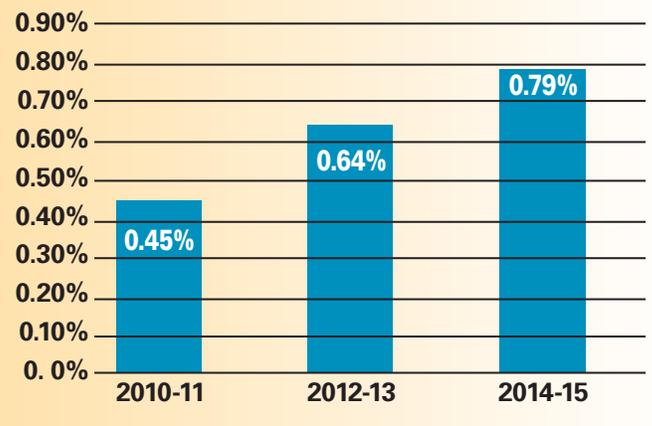
A parent or guardian must present a statement signed by the child's physician. Unless the statement specifies that a lifelong condition exists, the exemption statement is valid for only one year from the date when the physician signed it.

#### 2. To claim an exemption for reasons of conscience, including a religious belief:

- For students in child care centers, and elementary and secondary schools, a parent or guardian must submit a signed and notarized affidavit form provided by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). The affidavit will be valid for two years. During this period, the school may exclude the child from school attendance in times of an emergency or epidemic declared by the commissioner of public health.
- Students at institutions of higher education must request and submit the affidavit form from DSHS.
- College students entering public junior colleges can complete and submit a form available from the DSHS website.



### Texas Students With Conscientious Exemption



The percentage of students claiming a conscientious exemption in Texas elementary and secondary schools has increased in recent years.

While overall vaccine coverage in schools remains high in Texas, there is great variation. Some districts report more than 3 percent of students have conscientious exemptions, while some private schools report more than 20 percent of students have conscientious exemptions. TMA supports strengthening vaccine coverage reporting as a public health surveillance tool.

### Adult Exemptions

While no state law requires vaccines for employees of health care or nursing facilities, Texas law requires some facilities, including hospitals and child care centers, to create and implement employee vaccine policies. These vary by facility, but any policy must allow for an exemption process, for both medical reasons and personal belief. The policies must specify safety procedures a vaccine-exempt employee is to follow. For example, a hospital vaccine policy could require all exempt employees to wear a mask and gloves during flu season.

## Physicians Advocating for Herd Immunity

Physicians recognize vaccine requirements are an important part of controlling preventable diseases in day cares and schools, some places of employment, and other settings. Where immunization rates may be low, herd immunity is compromised. This increases the threat of disease outbreak.

TMA endorses the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) immunization schedule and encourages all individuals who do not have a medical contraindication to get the recommended vaccines. Opting out of vaccines based on unfounded concerns is a threat to public health. TMA supports public policy that promotes compliance with immunization requirements, and opposes conscientious objections.

## Medical Contraindications and Precautions

Physicians recognize the need for medical exemptions. ACIP recommendations and vaccine package inserts include detailed information on vaccine-related contraindications and precautions. While the incidence of contraindication such as anaphylaxis may be low, individuals who experience a contraindication are at higher risk for developing severe disease.

Physicians should review conditions listed as precautions and consider the benefits and risks of administering a specific vaccine to a person under these circumstances.

## Conditions Commonly Misperceived as Contraindications

Physicians should also consider talking with patients about conditions commonly misperceived as contraindications to vaccinations. These conditions may be mistaken as reasons not to vaccinate and therefore may mean missed opportunities.

Some conditions misperceived as contraindications for most vaccines include:

- Mild acute illness with or without fever;
- Mild-to-moderate local reaction;
- Low-grade or moderate fever after previous dose; and
- Lack of previous physical examination in well-appearing person.

## Talking to Patients About Vaccines

As a trusted leader, you are one of the most influential sources of information for your patients. To help ensure a well-vaccinated Texas, explain to your patients that:

- Vaccines are safe. All vaccines undergo long and careful review by scientists, doctors, and the federal government to make sure they are safe.
- Ongoing monitoring of safety issues is the role of the national vaccine safety surveillance program, or Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, which collects information about adverse events (possible side effects).
- Vaccine-preventable and contagious diseases are still a threat. In Texas in 2014, for example:
  - Measles: 10 cases
  - Chickenpox (varicella): 1,647 cases
  - Whooping cough (pertussis): 2,576 cases
- Outbreaks of preventable infectious diseases occur when many people choose not to get vaccinated.
- People who are not vaccinated are a threat and can spread disease to other people who are too young or who have medical issues and cannot be vaccinated.

Source: Immunization Action Coalition

## Trusted Resources for Physicians

TMA recommends accessing the following resources for more information.

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Immunization schedules  
[cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/hcp/index.html](http://cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/hcp/index.html)
- Vaccine Contraindications and Precautions  
[cdc.gov/vaccines/recs/vac-admin/contraindications.htm](http://cdc.gov/vaccines/recs/vac-admin/contraindications.htm)

### Texas Department of State Health Services

- Immunization coverage in schools and child care facilities  
[dshs.state.tx.us/immunize/coverage/](http://dshs.state.tx.us/immunize/coverage/)
- Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS)  
<https://vaers.hhs.gov/index>

### Immunization Action Coalition

- Talking to parents about vaccines  
[immunize.org/handouts/discussing-vaccines-parents.asp](http://immunize.org/handouts/discussing-vaccines-parents.asp)



Physicians Caring for Texans

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