



TOPICS IN THE NEWS: DECLINING RATES OF CHILDHOOD IMMUNIZATIONS DURING COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Even as states begin to ease up their stay-at-home restrictions, concern lingers about the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the threat of a second wave. Along with those ongoing worries, health officials are bracing for another potential public health crisis, a spike in vaccine-preventable diseases brought on by the sharp decline in childhood immunization rates as parents shied away from routine wellness visits during the coronavirus quarantine.

In a [study](#) using data gathered from the federal [Vaccines for Children \(VFC\)](#) program and [Vaccine Safety Datalink \(VSD\)](#) vaccine administration data, researchers noted a striking decline in both provider orders for pediatric vaccines and doses administered, when comparing the months of January – April of 2019 and 2020. With the declaration of the national state of emergency on March 13 and as more states imposed strict stay-at-home orders, medical professions experienced a nearly 70% drop in outpatient visits, with pediatrics being among the hardest hit specialties, with a decrease of 62%. Parents were staying out of doctors' offices not just out of regard for their quarantine restrictions, but also out of fear of exposure to the coronavirus. Correspondingly, from March 13 – April 19 there was a 2.5 million-dose decline in orders of regular childhood vaccines such as whooping cough, diphtheria, tetanus, and a 250,000-dose decline in vaccines containing measles protection in that period. Though the report indicates that vaccination rates were down among all age groups, there was a smaller decline in children aged 24 months or less than among those greater than 24 months to 18 years.

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[Another study](#), co-authored by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), compared the vaccination status of children at various ages during May of this year, with those of comparable age groups during May of the previous four years. The result revealed an alarming double-digit decline in vaccinations in 2020. Fewer than half of babies 5 months old were current with their immunizations this year, compared to two-thirds of that age group in the previous years. Though based on data from Michigan, it is presumed to reflect a national trend.

WHY IT MATTERS

Public health officials worry that as states begin to relax their stay at home restrictions and people begin moving about, unvaccinated children or those with lapsed vaccinations will be vulnerable to outbreaks of other, preventable childhood diseases, in addition to the ongoing threat of COVID-19. As vaccination rates decline, so too, does the prospect of [herd immunity](#) keeping communities safe from a disease. For example, in the case of measles, it is estimated that a community vaccination rate from 93 percent to 95 percent is necessary to prevent a widespread outbreak.

Pandemic aside, maintaining vaccination rates is critical to the strength of our healthcare services. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate vaccines prevented 21 million hospitalizations and over 730,000 deaths among children between 1994 and 2013. Routine vaccination prevents illnesses that lead to unnecessary medical visits, hospitalizations and further strain the healthcare system.

INTERVENTIONS

To halt the decline in immunization rates has required innovations in practice and communication strategies. Pediatric offices have stretched the boundaries of typical practice to meet patients where families feel safe. From separate hours and rooms for well visits and sick patient visits, to curbside shots to even home visits, pediatricians have found ways to overcome parents' reluctance to venture out. The CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics have helped pediatric practices develop effective social media campaigns to broadcast the importance of maintaining well child visits, and the protocols in place to keep those visits safe.

Another concern is that as unvaccinated children return to school, the rush to be compliant with school immunization requirements will tax capacity. To diffuse the burden of catch-up vaccinations, strategies are in place to encourage vaccination opportunities throughout the summer such as frequent and mobile clinics.

And to overcome any perceived financial hurdle to obtaining immunizations, the CDC is promoting the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program, which provides free vaccines to eligible children. As families have lost income or access to insurance because of the pandemic, those newly eligible may not be aware of its existence.

BACKGROUND SOURCES

- [MDHHS – Immunization Info for Families and Providers](#)
- [CDC Immunization Schedules](#)
- [VaxView](#): The CDC’s website for vaccination coverage data for all ages.

LEGISLATION ON IMMUNIZATION INTRODUCED IN MICHIGAN LEGISLATION

- [2019/2020](#)
- [2017/2018](#)
- [2015/2016](#)
- [2013/2014](#)
- [2011/2012](#)

READ MORE

- [“Decline in Child Vaccination Coverage During the COVID-19 Pandemic — Michigan Care Improvement Registry, May 2016–May 2020”](#), *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 5/22/2020
- [“Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration — United States, 2020”](#), *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 5/15/2020
- [“Health experts: Drop in Michigan immunizations during COVID crisis could lead to outbreaks”](#), *Detroit News*, 05/26/2020
- [“Vaccinations Fall to Alarming Rates, C.D.C. Study Shows”](#), *New York Times*, 5/18/2020aa
- [“Don't Skip Your Child's Well Check: Delays In Vaccines Could Add Up To Big Problems”](#), *Michigan Radio*, 4/29/2020
- [“Vaccine Rates Drop Dangerously as Parents Avoid Doctor’s Visits”](#), *New York Times*, 4/23/2020

NOTE

If you need assistance accessing any of these resources, please email librarian@michigan.gov.