

Vaccinate Vermont

Vermont Department
of Health

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What does it mean to have a religious exemption?

With the passage of Act 37 by the Vermont Legislature, beginning in July 2016, parents will not be able to use a philosophical exemption to exempt children/students from vaccines required for enrollment in child care or schools. Immunization requirements in child care and school have made a significant contribution to the reduction in vaccine preventable diseases in the U.S. As the prevalence of vaccine preventable diseases has declined, the perceived risk from vaccines has increased. These concerns persist despite extensive monitoring and research demonstrating the safety and benefit of required vaccines.

In the U.S., there are two types of non-medical (also referred to as personal belief) exemptions; religious and philosophical. Currently, 47 states have religious exemptions, but only [19 states](#) allow philosophical exemptions. (1) With the passage of Act 37 in May 2015, Vermont eliminated the philosophical exemption. This action was in response to public concerns regarding the risk of diseases spreading in child care and school due to current immunization rates. In July, California passed legislation that eliminates all non-medical exemptions (religious and philosophical).

Historically, Vermont has had a very low rate of children with religious exemptions, as most parents who opted out of vaccinating their child chose the philosophical exemption. With the elimination of the philosophical exemption, there are new questions regarding religious exemptions.

The first religious exemption was passed in New York State in 1966, but, it was not well publicized. The New York legislation required polio vaccine for school entry but excluded children whose parents' religion forbade vaccination. In the book *Deadly Choices*, author Dr. Paul Offit notes that the exclusion clause was a direct result of lobbying by the Christian Scientists. (2)

Additional court rulings in the next decade broadened the definition of a religious exemption beyond that of an organized religion. In the 1970's, a Supreme Court decision (regarding conscientious objectors to the draft) found that "religious" can encompass "moral, ethical, or religious beliefs about what is right and wrong," that "are held with the strength of traditional religious convictions."⁽³⁾

State-specific requirements for a religious exemption vary widely. In New York State, a religious exemption may be granted by a school when a parent provides a written and signed statement indicating that she/he objects to their child's immunization because of sincere and genuine religious beliefs that prohibit the immunization of their child. The school administrator may require supporting documents, and makes the decision to accept or reject the exemption request. In New Hampshire, parents must sign a notarized form that says: "immunization conflicts with religious beliefs." In Vermont, legislation states that parents seeking a religious exemption must read Parent Education materials developed by the Health Department, and sign and submit a Health Department published exemption form annually. This form identifies the individual vaccines for which a parent is choosing to exempt their child, and does not require a parent to identify an organized religion or address the sincerity of their beliefs. Experience in other states has shown that determination of the sincerity of beliefs is difficult and at times contentious. (4) The updated child care and school immunization forms for school year 2016-17 will be available by March 1, 2016.

1) <http://www.immunize.org/laws/>

2) Offit, PA. *Deadly Choices: How the Anti-Vaccine Movement Threatens Us All*, 2011, 141-45.

3) Reiss, Dorit Rubenstein. *Thou Shalt Not Take the Name of the Lord Thy God in Vain: Use and Abuse of Religious Exemptions from School Immunization Requirements*, *Hastings Law Journal*, Aug 2014 1556-1557.

4) Reiss (2014) p. 1556.



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Eligibility Change - Vaccine for Adult (VFA) Program

Effective January 1, 2016, only adults age 19 – 64 years will be eligible for the Vermont Vaccines for Adult (VFA) Program. The goals of the VFA Program are to increase adult immunization rates by providing vaccines at no cost to primary care providers. The main source of funding for the VFA Program is health insurers. However Medicare, which provides outpatient insurance coverage for over 85% of those 65 years and older, does not participate in the VFA Program.

Lack of funding from Medicare led to inconsistent eligibility for VFA vaccines and provider office confusion affecting patient care and billing procedures. Vaccines for use in adults 65 years and older may either be privately purchased by medical offices, or patients may receive vaccines through pharmacies.

Vaccine options for adults 65 and older:

- [Medicare Part B](#) covers influenza, pneumococcal vaccines, Hepatitis B, and Td for those at risk.
- [Medicare Part D](#) plans generally cover vaccines that Part B does not cover. However, fewer people have Part D and physicians sometimes aren't able to bill directly.
- Many pharmacies administer and cover vaccines provided under Part D.

Immunization Program Changes for 2016

Effective January 1, 2016, the Immunization Program will implement the following changes to create efficiencies and better support your practice's efforts to meet requirements and achieve optimal immunization rates. A key change will be the transfer of VFC/VFA education and site visits to the Central Office. The primary focus of the public health nurses in the district offices will be to increase immunization rates in their respective communities.

Central office

- All VFC/VFA site visits will be conducted by public health specialists (PHS). This includes: enrollment, education, compliance and unannounced visits. The public health specialist will also handle all temperature excursion calls and data logger issues, as well as VFC/VFA reenrollment and follow up.
- The PHS will conduct on-site training and education related to the VFC/VFA program requirements and recommendations.
- Ines Burazerovic, VFC Coordinator will oversee the VFC/VFA team responsible for this work.

District office

- Public health immunization nurses (PHN-IZ) will offer CDC AFIX (quality improvement) visits throughout the year to all VFC/VFA practices in their area.
- PHN-IZ staff will continue to serve as the local vaccine expert, addressing questions on vaccine usage and schedules.
- Monthly immunization clinics will be offered by each District for children and adults lacking access or insurance. Check with your PHN-IZ to learn the time and date in your area.
- PHN-IZ will conduct community outreach to identify needs and support local efforts to improve immunization rates.
- PHN-IZ will participate in emergency preparedness planning efforts.

Contact the Immunization Program at ahs.vdhimmunizationprogram@vermont.gov with any questions or comments regarding this change.

VDH wins Two Immunization Coverage awards from CDC

This December, the Vermont Immunization Program received two Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Immunization Coverage Awards. The awards are a reflection of collaborative efforts between the Health Department and Vermont health care providers.

1. Progress in improving influenza vaccination coverage among children 6 months -17 years.

- Vermont provides all recommended vaccines for those ages 0-18 years at no cost to providers.
- Vermont has a strong medical home model with statewide quality improvement initiatives (with fiscal incentives) that include immunization levels.
- State legislation requires that all vaccines administered to children 0-18 be entered into the Immunization Registry within seven days.

2. Highest herpes zoster vaccination coverage among adults ≥ 60 years

- An increased number of providers choosing to enroll in the state run/insurer funded Vaccines for Adult program that provides all recommended vaccines (except flu) to those 19-64 years.
- Zoster vaccine is made available at no cost to primary care providers for use in patients 60-64 years.

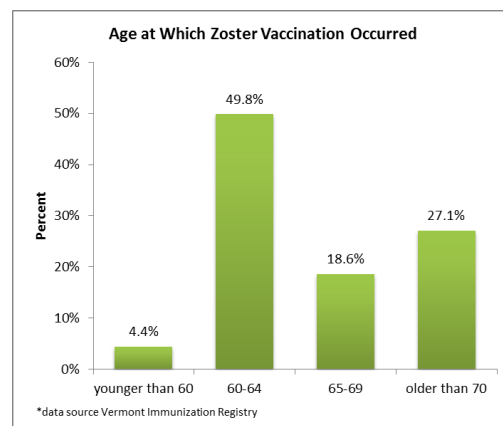
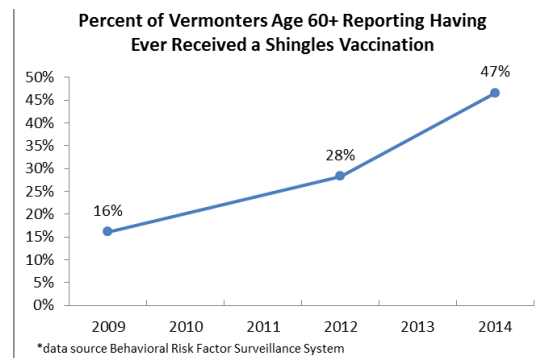
Thank you for all that you do to immunize Vermonters!

Increase in Zoster Vaccination Rates

Since 2006, the CDC has recommended that all adults ages 60 and older receive a single dose of zoster vaccine to prevent shingles, which can cause post herpetic neuralgia.

Since 2011, the state-run Vaccines for Adults Program has provided zoster vaccine to practices enrolled in the program for use in their patients 60-64 years. In the past year, 5,890 doses of zoster vaccine valued at \$686,159 were provided to Vermont primary care providers.

The following two charts demonstrate that the program is achieving desired results. Providers are encouraged to ensure those aged 60-64 receive zoster vaccine to help alleviate the challenges and costs that Medicare patients face in accessing zoster vaccine through Part D.



HPV Coverage in Vermont Teens 13 through 17 Years: Progress!

In 2015, the [Vermont Immunization Registry](#) (IMR) sent quarterly reports to all Vermont primary care practices to provide direct feedback about their immunization coverage with Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine. The reports provided practice-specific coverage rates including the number and percentage of adolescent patients who began the vaccine series, as well as the number and percent who completed it. In addition, each practice received the corresponding statewide numbers, so they could see how their practice was doing in comparison to other Vermont practices.

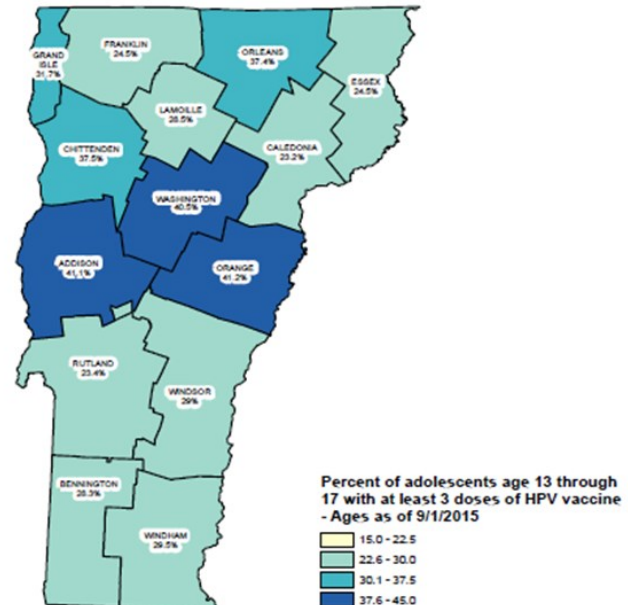
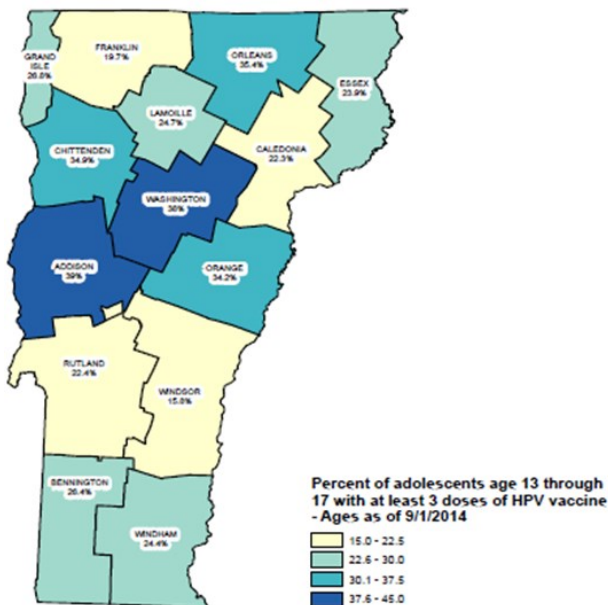
Larger practices were especially effective in improving their rates. Twelve Vermont practices with at least 400 adolescent patients have achieved series initiation rates above 65%, and five of these have achieved series completion for over 55% of their patients. This is good progress.

Washington, Addison, and Orange counties achieved HPV series completion for over 40% of all adolescents. All counties made some progress. Below are the statewide rates for HPV series initiation for each of the previous four quarters.

HPV Series Initiation: Percentage of teens age 13 - 17 who received at least one dose of HPV

Assessment Period	Assessment Date	% females 1 dose HPV	% males 1 dose HPV	% patients 1 dose HPV
Q4 2014	1/28/2015	54.0%	41.7%	47.7%
Q1 2015	5/8/2015	55.7%	43.8%	49.6%
Q2 2015	8/7/2015	56.5%	45.5%	50.9%
Q3 2015	11/3/2015	58.1%	47.7%	52.8%

Source: Vermont Immunization Registry



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