



## Reasons to Vaccinate for Life - Op/Ed

***National Infant immunization Week — April 23-30***

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BURLINGTON—I am dedicated to increasing the immunization rate for Vermont children.

Our state's childhood immunization rate has recently dropped below the national average, and we need to reverse this trend quickly. It is our responsibility to help protect the next generation from infectious diseases that, in the past, would have spread quickly through communities and sickened or killed thousands.

Ten years ago, Vermont led the nation in the percentage of children who were fully immunized. But vaccination rates are declining across the country as concerns about their safety and effectiveness are debated among parents, pediatricians and public health experts.

Vaccines have a well established safety record, and are thoroughly tested before they can be approved for public use. Like any medication, vaccines are not without side effects, but these usually amount to minor discomfort or a low fever.

Paradoxically, the success of vaccines in preventing disease may be the very reason that caring, thoughtful parents choose not to fully vaccinate their children. Parents of young children may not remember or fully realize the risks compared to the benefits of vaccination. And misinformation, organized disinformation and junk science has raised new doubts.

Concerns were further amplified by a study published in 1998 that wrongly linked vaccines with autism, justifiably raising fear and anxiety for many parents. While there has been a rise in the number of children diagnosed with autism, we still do not know the cause. However, vaccines are not the culprit, and 14 different studies of millions of children have proven that there is no link.

One thing we do know for sure is that – when groups of children are unvaccinated – rare illnesses can blossom into outbreaks that haven't been seen in the United States for decades. Vaccines are only effective against infectious diseases if nearly everyone in the population is immunized – giving the virus (or bacteria) nowhere to go, nowhere to thrive, and no way to spread.

Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases affect vulnerable populations, such as infants who are too young to be vaccinated and people with weakened immune systems or conditions that make them ineligible for vaccination.

We are now seeing a resurgence of diseases like pertussis (whooping cough) that sickened more than 20,000 Americans in 2010, and killed 10 infants in California last year. So far this year, 24 European countries are experiencing large outbreaks of measles. Measles cases are being reported in pockets of Minnesota, Utah, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. A few recent cases of measles have been reported just north of the Vermont border in Quebec.

Although many children in Vermont have had most of their vaccinations, little more than 60 percent have had all of the doses for all of the vaccines recommended for their age group. To maximize effectiveness for the whole community, it is important for individual children to follow the immunization schedule published by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

Today there are vaccines to protect against 14 serious diseases. That's quite a few more than when I was young, or even when my own children were vaccinated – and that's a good thing. You can protect your children by getting them vaccinated.

I believe that vaccinations are one of the great public health achievements of our time. If you have questions, talk with

your health care provider, check the Health Department's website at <<http://www.healthvermont.gov>> <<http://www.healthvermont.gov/>> > and our newest Facebook page – Healthy Vermont Families.

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