

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: California Sees Increase in Parents Seeking Exemptions From Vaccination Requirements

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More kindergarteners are entering California's schools without completing their required vaccines. Public health officials and even state legislators are working to change this, but some parents and advocates are pushing back. This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Rachel Dornhelm.

Vaccinations against harmful -- in some cases lethal -- infectious diseases are required to attend school in all 50 states. However, 18 states, including California, have something called a personal belief exemption. That gives parents the right to opt out of the requirement. The director of the California Department of Public Health's Immunization Branch, John Talarico, says those requests are on the rise.

(Talarico): "Actually, over the past five years, it's gone from 1.4% to 2.6%, so that might not seem like a big change, but what we know about personal belief exemptions is they tend to cluster. So these are not dispersed evenly throughout the population. We would probably have a little bit less of a concern if that were the case."

The 2010 data shows that although many schools have no parents seeking the vaccine exemption, other schools have such exemptions for anywhere between 5% and 60% of the student population.

(Talarico): "That is a concern, because there's a certain level of immunity within a community that is needed to keep the transmission of disease from occurring, and so when you have these clusterings, that's when you can see vaccine-preventable disease previously not seen or not seen in a long time, begin and then not just have a single case but have multiple cases as it goes through the vulnerable people in the population."

Talarico says to prevent something highly transmissible like measles from spreading, studies show that a vaccination rate of about 95% is required. He says it's a priority for the public health department to make sure more children in the state get vaccines. The department is doing that through online education and by giving health care providers suggestions for

communicating with parents who are hesitant to vaccinate their kids ... like Karen.

(Karen): "Are you thirsty? [mmm] Do you want me to bring you some chocolate milk?"

Karen is caring for her older child who is home from preschool with the chicken pox -- a disease for which most California kids now receive an inoculation. She says she'll be applying for a personal belief exemption when he starts kindergarten because she isn't convinced the required vaccines are safe.

(Karen): "Like there's the immediate stuff that can happen, in rare cases seizures, fever, brain damage, the things you read about. And longer term, I'm just scared to death about what does injecting a lot of these things into a small body do over the longer term."

Karen didn't want her last name used because she says tensions run so high around non-vaccination, she worries about a possible backlash against her children.

(Fisher): "I think that you're seeing, with the increase in the numbers of vaccines that children are recommended by the CDC and doctors to get, you're seeing more parents asking questions."

That's Barbara Loe Fisher. She co-founded the National Vaccine Information Center, a self-described vaccine watchdog group. She says right now they are advocating against pending legislation in California. [AB 2109](#) would require that parents get a signature from a pediatrician on their personal belief exemption. Loe says the bill would force parents to pay for an office visit, noting that some pediatricians refuse to accept families who don't vaccinate.

(Fisher): "To try to force them to then try to get a signature from a medical doctor that allows them to take a personal belief exemption is going to be very difficult."

Pediatrician Bruce Horwitz, who has practiced in Oakland for 45 years, has doubts about the bill. He thinks it would only make work for doctors -- but he thinks something needs to be done to increase vaccination rates. Horwitz says measles cases in California have been on the rise in recent years. And he worries about how the disease has taken off in France and other parts of Europe in the last year. He says he sees more and more parents in his practice who want to refuse or delay vaccines until later.

(Horwitz): "The people today say, 'Why should I immunize my kid against that? He's not going to get it. I've never seen anybody get polio, I've never seen anyone get measles. So it's not a threat.'"

Horwitz says that's hard to hear because he remembers treating children who had those diseases, which now are largely preventable. But, he and public health officials say, in this way vaccines seem to be a victim of their own success.

This has been a special report for California Healthline, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Rachel Dornhelm, thanks for listening.