



Date: February 10, 2009

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Parents reminded to get kids immunized by Feb. 18

Public health officials are advising parents that children won't be able to go to school or child care starting Feb. 18 if their records on file show that they are missing immunizations.

State law requires that all children in public and private schools, pre-schools, Head Start and certified child care facilities be up-to-date on their immunizations, or have a religious or medical exemption.

"The goal is to make sure children are fully protected against vaccine-preventable diseases," said Lorraine Duncan, immunization manager in the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division. "If school and child care shot records are not up-to-date, the child will be sent home."

Last year, local health departments sent 17,775 letters to parents informing them their children needed immunizations to stay in school. A total of 2,420 children were kept out of school or child care until the necessary immunization information was turned in to the school or child care facility.

This year, the number of exclusion letters is expected to increase because two more vaccines are required, Hepatitis A and Tdap. Hepatitis A is a two-dose series. One dose of Hepatitis A is required for children 18 months and older to begin child care, preschool and kindergarten, and the second dose is required no later than one year after the first dose. One dose of Tdap vaccine is required for 7th graders. Tdap is a tetanus and diphtheria booster that also protects against pertussis, known as whooping cough. Last year, Oregon recorded 175 cases of whooping cough — illnesses that could have been prevented.

Many children receive exclusion letters because their school or day care records are not updated, even though they may have all of their shots. School and child care staff may use Oregon Immunization ALERT, the statewide registry, to keep records current, but parents are responsible for ensuring that the school or day care has the required information. Duncan advises parents to update their child's immunization record at school or child care after every shot.

"Vaccination against childhood diseases is one of the most cost-effective preventive measures we have," Duncan said. "Making sure kids have all of their shots and don't miss school is a joint effort. DHS provides technical help, but it's the hard work and dedication of health departments, schools and children's facilities that really make this process work."

Parents seeking immunizations for their children should contact their health care provider or local health department, or call Oregon SafeNet at 800-SAFENET or 800-723-3638. No one can be turned away from a local health department because of inability to pay for required vaccines. Contributions toward administration costs are always welcome. Additional information on school immunizations can be found on the Web at www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/imm/school/.