

Changes to immunization requirements for school attendance: Q&A for health care providers

Updated: July 2014

This questions and answers document provides further information to accompany the fact sheet titled “Changes to the immunization requirements for school attendance: information for health care providers.”

What is the Immunization of School Pupils Act?

- Ontario’s Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) requires that parents of children attending primary or secondary school provide their local medical officer of health with proof of their child’s immunization against designated diseases.
- Public health units assess immunization coverage and contact parents of students for whom they do not have complete immunization records.
- Exemptions from immunization requirements are allowed for medical reasons (i.e., prior immunity or medical contraindication) or based on an affidavit of conscience or religious belief.
- Children for whom the public health unit does not have required immunization records or a valid exemption may be temporarily suspended from school until the required records are provided.

What changes are being made to the immunization requirements for school attendance in the 2014/15 school year?

- Beginning in the 2014/15 school year, children and adolescents will require proof of immunization against meningococcal disease, pertussis (whooping cough), and varicella (chickenpox) to attend school. (Note: varicella immunization is only a requirement for children born in 2010 or later.) This is in addition to the existing requirements for proof of immunization against tetanus, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, measles, mumps, and rubella.
- The number of required doses of tetanus, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, and mumps vaccines has been updated to align with current clinical guidelines.
- All changes to the immunization requirements for school attendance align with Ontario’s existing publicly funded immunization schedule. Children and adolescents who have received all recommended vaccines per the immunization schedule will not require any further immunizations.
- The requirements for complete immunization status are indicated in Ontario’s Immunization Schedule. Please see: <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/immunization>.

Why are these changes being made? Why are these three diseases in particular being added as designated diseases requiring immunization?

- These changes are being made to improve the health and safety of Ontario's schoolchildren. The changes will help protect children from vaccine-preventable diseases and reduce the risk of disease outbreaks in schools.
- These changes also align the immunization requirements for school attendance with Ontario's publicly funded immunization schedule, which is based on current clinical guidelines for the best protection of the population against vaccine-preventable diseases.
- Meningococcal disease, pertussis (whooping cough), and varicella (chickenpox) are easily spread among children and can cause outbreaks in schools.
- These diseases can cause serious illness and complications in children. It is therefore important that children attending school be immunized against these diseases to reduce the risk of outbreaks.

Who will these changes affect?

- The updated requirements for proof of immunization apply to all children and adolescents (between the ages of 4 to 17) attending primary or secondary school in Ontario. Note that immunization requirements for children attending licensed daycare may be different and are determined by the local medical officer of health.
- Children and adolescents who have followed the immunization schedule will not require any further vaccines – they will have already received all the required immunizations.
- More than 70 per cent of students are already immunized against the three new designated diseases.
- Parents must ensure that these immunization records have been provided to their public health unit.

How are parents being informed of these changes?

- Information on the new requirements for proof of immunization will be sent to parents by public health units either directly or through their child's school.
- Information is also available on the ministry's website at: <http://www.ontario.ca/vaccines>.
- Parents who have not provided the required immunization records to their public health unit will receive notification from the public health unit.

Will these changes result in increased visits from clients to receive immunization services?

- You may be contacted by parents to verify that their children meet the immunization requirements for school attendance, or to catch up on required immunizations they may have missed. Please refer to Ontario's immunization schedule at: <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/immunization>.
- If the child has been immunized against the designated diseases with all doses appropriate for his/her age according to Ontario's immunization schedule, the child will meet the immunization requirements for school attendance.
- Please remind parents to provide their child's immunization records to their public health unit.
- You may also be contacted by parents requesting records of previous immunizations so that they can be provided to their public health unit. Please note that the provision of an immunization record is included as part of the insured service for immunization and cannot be billed to a client.

Are medical exemptions permitted for children who should not be immunized due to a medical contraindication, or who do not need to be immunized because of prior immunity?

- Yes. In such cases, a statement of medical exemption must be completed by a physician or nurse practitioner for the parent to provide to their public health unit. Please note that the provision of a statement of medical exemption is part of an insured service and cannot be billed to a client.
- The statement of medical exemption form is available from your public health unit or on the Ontario government's online forms repository at <http://www.forms.ssb.gov.on.ca>.
- Exemptions due to medical contraindication can be provided for any reason determined by the health care provider, and can either be permanent or limited to a specified period of time.
- Evidence of immunity against measles, mumps, or rubella requires laboratory confirmation of immunity or infection.
- Evidence of immunity against varicella (chickenpox) requires either:
 - diagnosis or verification of a history of varicella or herpes zoster infection by a health care provider; or
 - laboratory confirmation of immunity or infection.

Under what circumstances should a health care provider verify a history of prior varicella or herpes zoster infection to complete a medical exemption form?

- In order to verify a history of varicella or herpes zoster infection, the health care provider must be confident that the child was infected and is considered immune to varicella. It is up to the health care provider to use his/her clinical judgment to determine whether he/she can verify a history of varicella or herpes zoster infection.
- A medical exemption should not be provided for varicella or herpes zoster infection occurring when the child was less than 12 months of age. This is because varicella disease at less than 12 months of age has been associated with an increased risk of a second episode of varicella. Children with a history of varicella disease occurring before 12 months of age should receive routine immunization with two doses of varicella-containing vaccine after 12 months of age.
- If a health care provider is unable to verify that a child had a prior varicella or herpes zoster infection, the provider may recommend that the child be immunized with two doses of varicella vaccine. Children remain eligible to receive two doses of publicly funded varicella vaccine regardless of prior infection, and prior infection is not a contraindication to receiving the vaccine.
- If a health care provider is unable to verify that a child had a prior varicella or herpes zoster infection and the parent does not wish to have the child immunized, the provider may recommend a serologic test (varicella IgG) for laboratory confirmation of immunity in order to complete the statement of medical exemption.
- Serologic testing is not recommended for healthy children who have received varicella immunization because some varicella IgG tests may not have sufficient sensitivity to detect antibody after immunization.
- Alternatively, if the parent does not wish to have the child immunized, the parent may choose to complete a statement of conscience or religious belief.
- Please refer to the following resources for more information regarding clinical presentation and other information on varicella and herpes zoster disease.
 - Public Health Agency of Canada, Information on Varicella: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/vpd-mev/varicella-eng.php>
 - Public Health Agency of Canada, "Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine." *Canadian Immunization Guide*: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/cig-gci/p04-vari-eng.php>

Are exemptions permitted for children whose parents are religiously or philosophically opposed to immunization?

- Yes. Parents can obtain a statement of conscience or religious belief affidavit form from their public health unit or on the Ontario government's online forms repository at: <http://www.forms.ssb.gov.on.ca>.
- A statement of conscience or religious belief must be sworn before a commissioner for taking affidavits in and for the courts in Ontario.
- Parents should contact their public health unit for more information.

Are all of the required vaccines available for administration by health care providers?

- Most of the vaccines required for school attendance are routinely administered by health care providers and can be ordered as per existing processes for ordering publicly funded vaccines.
- One exception is the meningococcal ACYW-135 vaccine for adolescents. In Ontario, this vaccine is routinely provided to students in grade 7 through school-based immunization clinics.
- Students who are currently in grades 8 to 12 who declined to receive the meningococcal ACYW-135 vaccine when they were in grade 7 will be required to receive a publicly funded catch-up dose to meet the updated immunization requirements for school attendance.
- Students who may have received meningococcal ACYW-135 vaccine prior to grade 7 (e.g., through private purchase) are not required to receive a subsequent dose, but it is recommended that they receive a subsequent dose in adolescence. These students continue to be eligible for a publicly funded dose of Men-C-ACYW.
- Catch-up clinics may be offered by the health unit in schools or community clinics throughout the school year.
- Health care providers may also be able to provide the meningococcal ACYW-135 vaccine to their clients upon request. Please contact your public health unit for information on how to access this vaccine if required.

Who can I contact for more information?

- Further information, including Ontario's publicly funded immunization schedule, is available on the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's website for health care professionals at: <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/immunization>.
- If you have further questions, please contact your public health unit. To find your public health unit, visit: <http://www.phdapps.health.gov.on.ca/PHULocator>.
- Public information is available at: <http://www.ontario.ca/vaccines>.