

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Wolf Administration Highlights the Importance of Vaccinations and Introduces Updated Guidelines for New School Year

Harrisburg, PA – The Pennsylvania departments of Education, Health, Human Services, and Insurance are reminding parents to ensure their children’s immunizations are up to date as part of back-to-school preparations. Vaccine requirements also extend to students of cyber and charter schools.

Vaccines are a necessary precaution needed to protect infants, children and teens from serious childhood diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox. Staying up to date with immunizations provides the best protection against disease and is essential to individual and population health.

Under the Affordable Care Act, most insurance plans, including those bought through the federal Marketplace, as well as the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid are required to cover school vaccinations as a free preventive service without charging a copayment or coinsurance.

“Most insurance plans cover school vaccinations with no cost to the consumer, regardless of whether or not you have met your yearly deductible,” Insurance Commissioner Jessica Altman said. “However, it is important to make sure that the doctor or provider who administers the immunization is within your health insurance plan’s network, or you could be responsible for the cost.”

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and guardians should schedule immunization appointments early, as many health care providers may have delays in scheduling and decreased appointment windows. To address this potential issue, the Department of Health has temporarily suspended the regulation regarding requirements for children’s immunization for a two-month period after the beginning of the school year or the beginning of enrollment in an early childhood education program.

The temporary regulatory suspension of children’s immunizations requirements allows children to enter and attend school or an early childhood program for two months without the required immunizations. The department is temporarily suspending the list of immunizations a child must have and the grades in which the child must have them, the requirement that children who do not meet the regulations should be excluded, the guidelines that schools need to follow to verify that children with medical exemptions who are on a plan to get their immunizations actually get them, and the regulation that requires children currently enrolled in child care programs maintain updated immunizations according to the federal guidelines.

“It is essential that everyone, especially children, are up-to-date on all recommended immunizations,” Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine said. “As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our state, we want to emphasize that vaccines are a safe and effective way to protect yourself from a number of serious, life-threatening diseases. Getting your vaccinations can help protect those around you, such as those with compromised immune systems who cannot get vaccinated.”

Vaccine-preventable diseases can be very dangerous, may require hospitalization, and can even result in death. A discussion with your doctor or your child’s doctor can help determine which vaccines are needed.

In recent years, a change in state regulations altered the provisional period in which students could attend school without their vaccinations from eight months to five days. Children in grades K-12 need the following immunizations for attendance: tetanus, diphtheria, polio, MMR (measles, mumps, rubella), hepatitis B, and chickenpox.

Children entering the seventh grade also need additional immunizations of meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV) and tetanus, diphtheria, acellular pertussis (Tdap). If a child does not have at least one dose of the above vaccinations, he or she risks exclusion from school.

Health coverage is available for all children in Pennsylvania. No family makes too much money to purchase coverage through CHIP, and families or children may qualify for coverage through Medicaid. Immunizations and well-child visits necessary to help kids stay healthy are covered through both of these programs. If families have lost coverage due to a change in income or employment, CHIP and Medicaid can ensure parents can access affordable health coverage and care for their children.

“The benefits of a healthy childhood spans across a child’s life, affecting child development, their experience in school, and life into adulthood,” said Human Services Secretary Teresa Miller. “Immunizations are a necessary part of well-child visits and help your children and others they encounter stay safe from preventable diseases. As Pennsylvania faces a pandemic, we cannot lose sight of what we can do every day to protect our children and prevent outbreaks and spread of other preventable illnesses.”

More information on CHIP can be found at www.chipcoverspakids.com. Families can apply for coverage through the CHIP program and determine their eligibility for Medicaid and other assistance programs that can help families online at www.compass.state.pa.us.

Anyone looking to visit a local immunization clinic to receive vaccinations should call 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258) to schedule an appointment. Pennsylvanians should have their vaccination records available when they call to make an appointment. A parent or legal guardian must accompany a child receiving vaccinations.

Additional information on immunizations can be found on the Department of Health’s website at health.pa.gov.

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