

California's new vaccine law: Questions and answers

By Jessica Calefati and Tracy Seipel

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Here are some questions and answers about the controversial vaccine law that Gov. Jerry Brown signed on Tuesday:

Q What will the new law do?

A Senate Bill 277 requires almost all California children who attend private or public schools to be fully vaccinated regardless of their parents' personal or religious beliefs. Unvaccinated children can attend schools only if they obtain a medical exemption from a doctor.

Q When will the law take effect?

A July 1, 2016. Schools will be required to verify students' immunization records before the start of kindergarten and seventh grade.

Q Can the law be repealed?

A Opponents of the legislation have 90 days from Tuesday to file at least 365,880 valid signatures and all other necessary paperwork needed to get a referendum on the November 2016 ballot aimed at repealing the law. If they succeed, the law wouldn't go into effect until after the election.

Q What if I don't want to get my children vaccinated?

A You will have to enroll your children in a home school or an independent study program affiliated with a public school.

Q But I've heard that thousands of parents won't have to vaccinate their children if they have "personal belief exemptions" in place.

A That's true to some extent. The authors of SB277 amended the bill to make it clear that many students whose parents have claimed personal belief exemptions will be "grandfathered in." That means that more than 13,000 children who have had no vaccinations by first grade won't have to get their shots

until they enter seventh grade. And nearly 10,000 seventh-graders who today aren't fully vaccinated may be able to avoid future shots because the state does not always require them after that grade.

Q How many other states have such strict rules on childhood vaccination?

A California joins two other states -- Mississippi and West Virginia -- that do not allow parents to opt out of vaccinations for school-aged children based on their personal or religious beliefs.

Q Which vaccines are required under the new law?

A The legislation makes no changes to the list of vaccines required to attend public or private school. Those 10 vaccines include diphtheria, hepatitis B, hemophilus influenzae type b (commonly referred to as Hib), measles, mumps, pertussis, poliomyelitis, rubella, tetanus and varicella. Parents can obtain a personal-belief exemption for any other immunizations deemed appropriate by state public health officials in the future.

Q Are there any exceptions?

A A physician has broad authority to grant medical exemptions to children, especially if they believe the child will be physically harmed by vaccines. Children whose older siblings or other relatives have had bad reactions to vaccines also could seek a medical exemption under the law.

Q What sparked lawmakers' interest in changing the state's vaccination laws?

A Efforts to eliminate California's exemption to vaccination based on personal and religious beliefs began after a measles outbreak at Disneyland in December sickened 136 people in California. The bill's authors -- Sens. Richard Pan, D-Sacramento, and Ben Allen, D-Santa Monica -- said the outbreak could have been prevented if more Californians were fully immunized.

Q How many California schoolchildren are immunized?

A More than a quarter of schools in California have measles immunization rates that fall below the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation of 92 percent to 94 percent -- the level needed to maintain so-called herd immunity. Statewide, 2.5 percent of kindergarteners are missing at least one of the required shots because of their parents' personal or religious beliefs. However, those rates are much higher in some towns and school districts.