As Hepatitis B Cases Soar in Florida, Childhood Vaccination Will Soon Be Optional

Florida plans to eliminate school vaccine mandates for hepatitis B, chickenpox and more, but experts emphasize vaccine safety.

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Despite rising hepatitis B virus (HBV) cases among children in Florida, state officials are rolling back vaccine mandates for infants and school-age children, including the shot to prevent HBV, reports WUSF.

HBV is a highly contagious viral infection that can cause liver damage, liver cancer and more.

The best way to prevent HBV is to be vaccinated early in life. Indeed, several highly effective vaccines are available. What's more, studies show that immunity persists for at least 30 years among healthy people who initiate HBV vaccination at less than 6 months of age, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Earlier this month, Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo, MD, PhD, said the state will work to eliminate all vaccine mandates, calling them "wrong" and "immoral," according to NBC News. Florida is the first state to initiate such an extensive change. Other immunizations, like those against polio, rubeola, rubella, mumps and tetanus, however, are written into state statutes and would require legislation to eliminate.

In 2023, Florida had 11 documented acute HBV cases in children, the most since 2001. What's more, chronic HBV cases have significantly increased from 597 cases in 2005 to 5,694 in 2023.

Infectious disease experts highlight the safety of the vaccine for infants and school-age children and warn that there is no medical reason to remove a state requirement for HBV vaccines.

“It’s a very safe vaccine,” Scott Weaver, PhD, an infectious disease expert at the University of Texas Medical Branch, told WUSF.

Weaver also emphasized that the vaccine is "not a live, replicating virus, unlike some vaccines, so almost anybody can take it. It can be given to very young babies, and it’s very effective.”

In response to Ladapo’s decision, the Florida chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is altering state immunization requirements for schoolchildren and is lobbying lawmakers to keep mandates for vaccines against polio, measles and other diseases.

“I don’t believe there is a single vaccine that is not important,” said chapter president, Rana Alissa, MD. “Every vaccine counts, and the reason why people are living longer is because of these vaccines. Children are healthier than any time because of these vaccines.”

The state’s plan to drop school vaccine mandates likely will not take effect for 90 days, according to The Associated Press. What’s more, the Florida Department of Health said vaccines will remain available to Floridians who want them.

“The update does not limit access to vaccines and instead removes the state mandate for the stated vaccines,” the agency said in a statement. “Medical freedoms are the focus, and these vaccines will remain available to families throughout Florida. Parents are encouraged to consult with their health care providers when making health care decisions for their children.”

Although hepatitis B has declined among children and adolescents since the adoption of universal HBV vaccination for infants, those who do contract the virus can develop serious liver complications, including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Last year, the Food and Drug Administration extended the approval of the antiviral medication Vemlidy (tenofovir alafenamide) to include children ages 6 and older with HBV, according to an announcement from Gilead Sciences. In a Phase II study, half of children who received Vemlidy achieved viral suppression.

To read more, click #HBV Vaccine or #Florida. There, you’ll see headlines such as "Earlier Maternal Hepatitis B Treatment Curbs Vertical Transmission," "Many Adults Underestimate Hepatitis B Virus and Vaccination Benefits" and "RFK Jr’s Vaccine Policies Could Undermine Coverage — and Trust."

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