

## Religious Exemptions Fact Sheet

**All but three states in the U.S. – California, Mississippi, and West Virginia – allow individuals to refuse immunizations for religious reasons (known as “religious exemptions”).** However, the level of difficulty required to obtain these exemptions varies significantly by state.<sup>1</sup>

***States that enable parents to more easily claim religious exemptions for their children often have higher religious exemption rates.***

- Overall, the **complexity of obtaining an exemption is associated with the number of exemptions filed.** In a 1999 study of immunization exemptions, the 19 states with the most formal requirements had a lower number of exemptions compared with states with less formal requirements.<sup>2</sup>
- During the 2011-2012 school year **0.7% of all kindergarteners were given exemptions in New York (known for its stricter exemption requirements), but only 5.9% of all kindergarteners were given exemptions in Oregon (known for its more lenient exemption requirements).**<sup>3</sup> This variance exists even though, under both Oregon and New York laws, parents can claim medical and religious, but not philosophical (or “personal belief”), exemptions for their children. This indicates that **the easier it is to claim an exemption, the more likely parents will do so.**
  - Parents in Oregon simply have to check the necessary boxes and sign a Certificate of Immunization Status available from schools and/or child-care facilities to show that their child is “being reared as an adherent to a religion the teachings of which are opposed to such immunization.”<sup>4, 5</sup>
  - In comparison, New York requires a written and signed statement from parents that states “sincere and genuine religious beliefs which prohibit the immunization of their child,” as well as additional documentation for the school which can decide whether to accept or reject the exemption request.<sup>6</sup>

***Exemptions – religious or otherwise – are dangerous and put individuals at risk for contracting potentially debilitating and deadly infectious diseases.***

- Children exempt from vaccination requirements are **more than 35 times more likely to contract measles<sup>7</sup> and nearly 6 times more likely to contract pertussis,<sup>8</sup>** compared to vaccinated children.
- **States with loose exemption policies had approximately 50% more cases of whooping cough compared to stricter states** in a 2006 study.<sup>9</sup>
- In Salmon et al.’s 1999 study, researchers found that **exemptors tend to cluster geographically.** The study further indicates that an increase in the number of exemptors within those clusters led to an **increase in measles among vaccinated populations.** For example, if 20% of a

population is unvaccinated, the researchers estimate there would be a 5.5% increase in measles cases among the vaccinated.<sup>10</sup>

***History illustrates that outbreaks are often common in communities that are unsupportive of vaccinations.***

- **Measles is one vaccine-preventable disease that has plagued multiple religious communities known to be either hesitant to vaccinate or completely against vaccination.**
  - **“Measles in Boston: Collision of Church and State, Science and Journalism”**: In 2006, an **employee at the Christian Science church headquarters** in Massachusetts was found to have measles, **eventually infecting at least 12 others**.<sup>11</sup> This was the **most recent major outbreak of measles in the U.S.**
  - **“Vaccination Fear Causes Measles Spate”**: In 2005, an **unvaccinated teenager** who returned from a mission trip in Romania **attended a church gathering of an anti-vaccination religious community. She infected 34 people in total** (most of whom were unvaccinated children).<sup>12, 13</sup>
  - **“Parents claim religion to avoid vaccines for kids”**: During 1990 and 1991 in Philadelphia, **nine children died and more than 1,400 people were infected with measles**. Two fundamentalist churches accounted for many of the cases and deaths. Of the mostly unvaccinated 892 church members, **486 contracted measles. Six of the nine children who died** were also members of these churches.

<sup>1</sup> The National Conference of State Legislatures. (February 2012). States with Religious and Philosophical Exemptions from School Immunization Requirements. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/health/school-immunization-exemption-state-laws.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Salmon, D.A., Teret, S.P., MacIntyre, C., Salisbury, D., Burgess, M.A., & Halsey, N. A. (2006). Compulsory vaccination and conscientious or philosophical exemptions: past, present, and future. *Lancet*, 367(9508):436-42. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16458770>

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (August 24, 2012). Vaccination Coverage Among Children in Kindergarten — United States, 2011–12 School Year. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, 61(33):647-652. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6133a2.htm>

<sup>4</sup> State Public Health Immunization Program (Oregon Department of Human Services). (April 2007). Claiming a Religious Exemption to School/Child Care Immunization Requirements in Oregon: What Parents Need to Know. Religious exemption brochure. Retrieved from <http://public.health.oregon.gov/PreventionWellness/VaccinesImmunization/GettingImmunized/Documents/SchRelExemtBrch.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Oregon Public Health Division. (August 31, 2012). Religious, Medical and Immunity Exemptions Overview. Retrieved from <http://public.health.oregon.gov/PreventionWellness/VaccinesImmunization/GettingImmunized/Documents/SchExempt.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> New York State Department of Health. (December 2010). Questions and Answers. Retrieved from [http://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/immunization/schools/docs/questions\\_and\\_answers.pdf](http://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/immunization/schools/docs/questions_and_answers.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Salmon DA, Haber M, Gangarosa EJ, Phillips L, Smith NJ, Chen RT. Health consequences of religious and philosophical exemptions from immunization laws: individual and societal risk of measles. *JAMA*.1999;282:47-53.

<sup>8</sup> Feikin DR, Lezotte DC, Hamman RF, Salmon DA, Chen RT, and Hoffman RE. Individual and Community Risks of Measles and Pertussis Associated With Personal Exemptions to Immunization. *JAMA* 2007;284:3145-3150.

<sup>9</sup> Omer, S.B., Pan, W.K., Halsey, N.A., Stokley, S., Moulton, L.H., Navar, A.M., Pierce, M., & Salmon, D.A. (2006). Nonmedical exemptions to school immunization requirements: secular trends and association of state policies with pertussis incidence. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 296(14):1757-63. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17032989>



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<sup>10</sup> Salmon, D.A., Haber, M., Gangarosa, E.J., Phillips, L., Smith, N.J., & Chen, R.T. (1999). Health consequences of religious and philosophical exemptions from immunization laws: individual and societal risk of measles. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 282(1):47-53. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10404911>

<sup>11</sup> Genes, N. (June 20, 2006). Measles in Boston: Collision of Church and State, Science and Journalism. *Medgadget*. Retrieved from [http://medgadget.com/2006/06/measles\\_in\\_bost.html](http://medgadget.com/2006/06/measles_in_bost.html)

<sup>12</sup> The College of Physicians of Philadelphia. (2012). Cultural Perspectives on Vaccination. *The History of Vaccines*. Retrieved from <http://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/articles/cultural-perspectives-vaccination>

<sup>13</sup> WebMD. (August 1, 2006). Vaccination Fear Causes Measles Spate. *CBS News*. Retrieved from [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500368\\_162-1857987.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500368_162-1857987.html)