

# How long will Idaho flirt with disease outbreaks?

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

With Idaho beginning another school year, the state finds itself at the top of one educational ranking.

Unfortunately, it's not good news.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 6.5 percent of Idaho's kindergarten students had filed an exemption for at least one vaccine. That's up from 6.4 percent last year.

Bonner County has Idaho's highest immunization exemption rate at 20.5 percent - or 246 children out of 1,197.

Clark County has the lowest at 0.

Within north central Idaho, the exemption rates are:

- Idaho County - 17.9 percent, the state's second highest. In all, 81 of 452 children have an exemption.
- Latah County - 9.5 percent, ranked eighth, with 127 out of 1,334 children exempt.
- Lewis County - 9.1 percent, 10th highest, with 20 children exempt.
- Nez Perce County - 4.5 percent (32nd), with 59 children exempt.
- Clearwater County - 4.1 percent (37th), with nine children exempt.

That's not to say more children are going without any vaccines. Overall, the state's immunization rates have been improving.

But it does mean there are pockets - both in terms of disease or location. All of this is occurring within an environment of complacency or outright pseudo-science practiced by vaccine skeptics such as the celebrity Jenny McCarthy.

All of which increases the vulnerability of people whose compromised immune systems leave them unable to be vaccinated - as well as those for whom the vaccination for whatever reason didn't take.

That's triggered outbreaks of childhood illnesses such as measles and whooping cough.

Idaho is among nine states a University of Georgia study concluded had the least effective child immunization laws. Joining Idaho on that list are Washington and Utah.

Not only do those states allow a medical exemption, but they permit parents of school-age children to refuse vaccinations on religious or philosophical grounds.

In Idaho, 0.3 percent of the exemptions were medical in nature. Another 0.6 percent cited religious reasons. The rest - 5.6 percent - listed philosophical grounds.

Three states - Mississippi, West Virginia and, now, California - deny exemptions on any grounds other than medical. No vaccination. No entry to public school.

Idaho relies on persuasion and public awareness. It also provides a conditional admission to school for children who plan to continue a scheduled series of shots.

And in the event of an outbreak, the state can bar unvaccinated students from entering school.

But that's after the fact.

Idaho's conservative lawmakers would resist following the lead of California and Mississippi. But the University of Georgia study offers some middle ground.

Subject faith-based exemptions to proof or clergy approval.

Anyone who checks the box for a philosophical exemption should at least first see a health care provider. That way, you can be sure someone is acting on a sincerely held belief rather than taking the path of least resistance while enrolling his child for school.

The study also recommends eliminating the standardized, two-page exemption form Idaho uses.

Even that may be a hard sell.

But Idaho clearly is headed in the wrong direction and flirting

with disease outbreaks - or even epidemics.

How long do you wait? - M.T.