

NON-MEDICAL EXEMPTIONS TO CHILDHOOD VACCINATION REQUIREMENTS IN THE U.S.

This brief outlines state policies related to non-medical exemptions (NMEs) for childhood vaccination requirements across the United States. Takeaways include:

- NMEs to school vaccination requirements are at an **all-time high**.
- Nearly all states allow NMEs, though the **procedures for obtaining these exemptions vary**.
- Policymakers in many jurisdictions are **advocating for changes** to current NME policies.

BACKGROUND

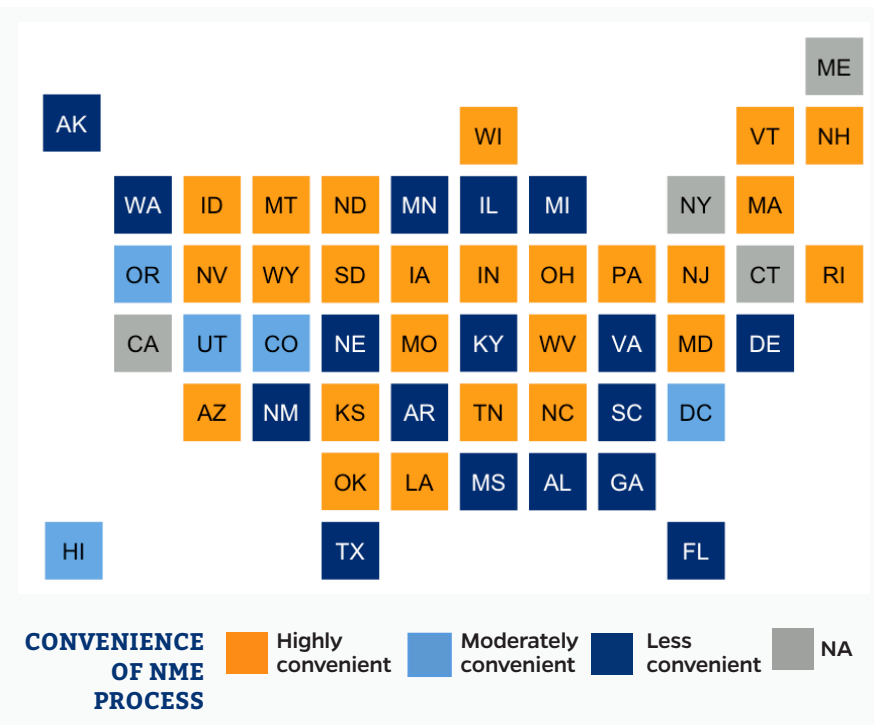
Children who attend school are required by law to receive certain vaccines, including those to protect against measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR). Exemptions from these requirements are permitted for children who are unable to receive vaccines for medical reasons and, in some states, for non-medical reasons. These NMEs can be for religious reasons, or personal beliefs, sometimes referred to as philosophical exemptions. Policymakers in several states proposed legislation related to NMEs in 2025, most of which would expand exemptions, and this trend is expected to continue.

NMEs reached an all-time high during 2024–25, with 3.4% of kindergartners in the U.S. receiving an NME for at least one vaccine, compared to just 2% in 2014–15. As children with NMEs are often clustered geographically, and **communities with higher rates of NMEs are more likely to have higher rates of vaccine-preventable diseases** like measles and whooping cough, this leaves increasing numbers of children at risk.

National non-medical exemption rates jumped from 1.9% in 2020–21 to 3.4% in 2024–25.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

All but 4 states (CA, CT, ME, and NY) allow NMEs. Most states allow religious exemptions (29), 14 states allow both religious and personal exemptions, and 2 states allow NMEs without specific reasoning. **In more than half of states, caregivers can obtain an NME with a simple signature.** Five jurisdictions add some friction to this process, such as obtaining a form from a local health department or completing an online educational module. Fewer than one-third of states with NMEs have a less convenient process to do so, requiring notarization or consultation with a health provider.



Sources:

Atwell JE, Van Otterloo J, et al. Nonmedical vaccine exemptions and pertussis in California, 2010. *Pediatrics*. 2013;132(4):624-630.
 CDC, SchoolVaxView Interactive! <https://www.cdc.gov/schoolvaxview/data/index.html>. Updated July 2025.
 Phadke VK, Bednarczyk RA, et al. Association Between Vaccine Refusal and Vaccine-Preventable Diseases in the United States: A Review of Measles and Pertussis. *JAMA*. 2016;315(11):1149-1158.
 State health and education agency websites

Learn more about NME policies in our state briefs!

