

I have seen what chickenpox does to a child. Why is Florida going backward?

 tampabay.com/viewpoints/2025/09/16/i-have-seen-what-chickenpox-does-child-why-is-florida-going-backward-column

Scott Rivkees

September 16, 2025



The chickenpox vaccine can be included in the MMRV vaccine, which is administered in two doses and also protects against measles, mumps and rubella.

The first patient that I cared for as a pediatric intern was a four-year-old boy who had severe brain inflammation from chickenpox (varicella). He was left neurologically impaired for life. I also cared for infants and school-age children, some of whom lost their hearing and had long-term learning problems, from meningitis caused by *Pneumococcus* or *Haemophilus influenzae*. I cared for children who had liver failure from hepatitis B infection.

Have your say. Leave a comment below and let us know what you think.

[Be the First to Comment](#)

That was 1982. Now, medical trainees only see these conditions in textbooks, as they have been eliminated in the U.S. through vaccination. Yet, with a proposed new rule change by Florida Surgeon General Dr. Josep Ladapo, these diseases will jump from the past to children now.

Earlier this month, Dr. Ladapo announced that he was seeking to remove all vaccine requirements for children to attend public school. Incredibly, on national television, he admitted that he did not make any estimates of the potential impact of his recommendations

on people in the state. The Florida Department of Health can make these projections, and it is standard practice to do so.

Furthermore, just two months earlier, a scientific report projected that cases of measles in the U.S. would increase by 11 million over 25 years if vaccination rates fell by 10% nationally, from current levels of about 92%. Based on these estimates, in Florida, there could be more than one million new measles cases, 250,000 hospitalizations and 1,000 deaths.

Dr. Ladapo's recommendations were strongly criticized by the medical community within and outside of Florida and by Florida elected officials. Even President Donald Trump disapproved. This recommendation is also at odds with public opinion nationally and within Florida, as about 80% of Republicans and Democrats are in favor of school vaccine requirements.

Before vaccination in the US, there were more than 4 million cases, 13,000 hospitalizations and 150 deaths a year from chickenpox. There were more than 17,000 cases of invasive pneumococcal disease and 150 deaths in children. There were more than 20,000 cases of invasive *Haemophilus influenzae* disease and 1,000 pediatric deaths. There were more than 18,000 cases of childhood Hepatitis B. Beyond the case numbers, it is essential to reflect on the fact that there is a human toll of these infections — brain damage, hearing loss, physical scars and an increased risk of liver cancer, as related to hepatitis B. Florida's proposed rule belittles these concerns.

Spend your days with Hayes

Subscribe to our free Stephinitely newsletter

Columnist Stephanie Hayes will share thoughts, feelings and funny business with you every Monday.



You're all signed up!

Want more of our newsletters in your inbox? **Let's get started.**

[Explore all your options](#)

Protection against vaccine-preventable diseases has two critical components. First, parents must vaccinate their own children. Second, since vaccines are not 100% effective, other parents must vaccinate their children, too, to protect others. This approach leads to a sufficient level of population immunity or herd immunity. A parent's decision to vaccinate their child thus has an impact on others.

Herd immunity is also critical for children with underlying medical conditions to be able to attend school safely. Immunocompromised children, those treated with immunosuppressive medications like prednisone, or those being treated for cancer, may be especially susceptible to infections.

There will be an impact on Florida's elderly and medically vulnerable adult population, too. Childhood illness spreads well beyond the school walls to the home and the community. Twenty-one percent of people in Florida are 65 years of age and older, and there are 4 million individuals with underlying medical conditions. Even if vaccinated themselves, elderly people and those with underlying medical conditions will be susceptible to illnesses that unvaccinated children may spread.

It was said that this issue of vaccination is a matter of absolute parental rights. Yet, this idea conflicts with what society believes and courts have ruled. The Supreme Court has said that vaccines are neither arbitrary nor oppressive and can be required for the greater good. As such, every state has vaccine requirements for children to attend public school.

Recognizing special medical conditions that preclude vaccination, all states have medical exemptions to vaccination. In addition, some states may allow exemptions for either religious or personal reasons, although no religion forbids vaccination. However, with the spillover effect of anti-COVID vaccine sentiment during the pandemic to pediatric vaccines, such exemptions are being used at an increasing pace in the US, and kindergarten vaccination rates are falling to worrisome levels. We are seeing this problem play out nationally; we are amid a record number of outbreaks, with 35 for measles in 2025 alone.

In Florida, in addition to rarely used medical exemptions, religious exemptions are permitted. Religious exemptions are now being used to such a degree that 2025 kindergarten vaccination rates for measles, mumps and rubella have fallen to or below 80% in several counties, including Sarasota, Broward and Brevard. This level is well below the 95% target needed for adequate herd immunity.

With falling vaccination rates, even with vaccine requirements in effect, we can expect to see sporadic outbreaks of disease in under-vaccinated areas in Florida. With the removal of vaccine requirements, coupled with increasing anti-vaccine rhetoric, vaccination rates will fall further, seriously jeopardizing school and community protection.

If we can agree on one thing, it should be that children should have the opportunity to thrive and learn in safe schools and healthy communities. For more than a century, vaccine requirements have been part of this safety net for children, and parents have recognized that vaccinating their children protects other children, too. Inexplicably, we now see leaders ignoring these principles for the sake of political ideology over health. Having seen diseases that we said goodbye to, I dread seeing children suffer from them again.

Scott Rivkees is a pediatrician and professor of practice at the Brown University School of Public Health. He was the Surgeon General and Secretary of Health in Florida.

Join the Conversation

Anyone can view a sampling of recent comments, but you must be a Times subscriber to contribute. Log in above or [subscribe here](#).

Conversations are opinions of our readers and are subject to the [Community Guidelines](#).