California Back-to-School Vaccine Messaging 2026

Back-to-school season is when lots of California kids get caught up on their vaccines. This year, we are seeing questions about back-to-school vaccine requirements much earlier than usual, due in part to confusing federal public health policy and guidance. As a trusted health messenger, we are hoping you can share the importance of childhood vaccines with your networks. Help us spread the word that childhood vaccines remain important, available, and covered in California.

Key Messages for 2026

- California school and childcare vaccine requirements are unchanged.
- This summer, add routine vaccines to your back-to-school checklist to guarantee a smooth, uninterrupted year of learning. Staying up to date on vaccines is the best way to safeguard your child's health and keep classmates safe from preventable illnesses.
- All vaccines recommended by the California Department of Public Health (and the American Academy of Pediatrics), including those required for childcare or school, continue to be covered by insurance in California.

Quick Access

- Trusted Health Messenger Here's What you Can Do
- 5 Guiding Principles for Back-to-School Messaging
- Parents Guide to Back-to-School Vaccines
- Clinician's Guide to Back-to-School Vaccines

As a Trusted Health Messenger, Here's What You Can Do

California Department of Public Health

As a Trusted Health Messenger, Here's What You Can Do

1. Share evidence-based information with your networks and communities

Trusted messengers come from every corner of community life – health care providers, community health workers, *promotores*, pediatricians, faith leaders, teachers, librarians, elected officials, community-based organizations, and parents. You don't need a medical background to make a difference. When people hear accurate vaccine information from someone they already know and respect, it matters. Find links to trusted information below and share with other trusted messengers in your community.

2. Find the childhood vaccination rates in your community

You can view which schools and childcare facilities in your area are at increased risk for outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease. Consider ways you can reach out to address areas of specific concern. Search by zip code, county, school name, or grade.

3. Point your networks to local vaccine providers

Many local health jurisdictions have websites where community members can find nearby vaccine providers. Connect with local health departments, managed care providers, and your network of health clinics and pediatric providers to identify local pharmacies and care providers/clinics that offer vaccines. Go to My Turn to find all recommended vaccines, book appointments, and access your Digital Vaccine Record.

4. Share Back-to-School resources with your community

Please share the Back-to-School Action Plan for 2026 with folks at work and in your community. Keep a lookout for more resources as we get closer to summer.

5. Reach out to the PHACT Coalition

Does your community face challenges that you would like some help addressing? Are there particular languages or cultural contexts where you need support? Your on-the-ground perspective is so valuable. Let us know what you hear locally. Contact us at cpr3@ucsf.edu.

California Back-to-School Vaccine Messaging 2026

Back-to-school season is a great time to encourage families to catch up on vaccines for the entire family. Here are some basic action steps you can take to help spread the word that vaccines save lives. Childhood vaccines prepare kids for a healthy childhood and benefit the community – and that's why California makes vaccines widely available, easy to find, and affordable for everyone.

5 Guiding Principles for Back-to-School Messaging for 2026

1. PREPARE

Expect and prepare for questions about California vaccine requirements. Encourage families and patients to plan early for back-to-school check-ups.

- Get comfortable with discussions about vaccines with parents and families by using resources like: American Academy of Pediatrics: Immunization Discussion Guides
- The PHACT Coalition prepared Q&A guides for parents and health care providers that answer commonly asked questions.

2. LISTEN

Acknowledge the questions and concerns of your patients and community members, and pivot toward clear explanations about how vaccines support healthy school communities.

- Trusted Health Messengers: Get curious about what your community needs, consider preferred languages and cultural norms, and acknowledge the practical barriers families face in accessing vaccines.
- Health Care Providers: Ask what questions your patients have and promote the many important benefits of vaccines at all levels in your health care delivery team.

3. CONNECT

Explain the benefits of childhood vaccines and how widespread immunization makes it harder for diseases to spread in shared spaces like schools.

- Do more of this: Focus on how vaccines help prepare children's immune systems, support healthy development, keep kids learning and thriving, and help school communities stay healthy.
- Use terms like 'vaccines' and 'school-based requirements.'
- Avoid: Debunking myths, using terms like 'shot' or 'mandate,' framing vaccines primarily as individual protection from diseases, and using militarized language like 'vaccines fight disease.'

4. INFORM

Share the basics of school vaccine requirements in California.

- California's school vaccine requirements are unchanged.
- All CDPH-recommended vaccines are covered by insurance with no co-pays or out-of-pocket costs to patients. Kids without insurance can receive required vaccines at no cost from their pediatrician, primary care doctor, or community clinic.
- Find vaccine locations at My Turn - California Vaccine Scheduling & Information Site. Kids with PPO insurance that are three and older can get vaccinated at most pharmacies. Call ahead to ensure they have the vaccines you need.
- Encourage families and patients to make well-child appointments for all their children, which may include school required vaccines, developmental screenings, and growth checks.

5. COLLABORATE

Remember that access is everything.

- Engage with back-to-school activities in your community.
- Contact your Local Health Services Department for more information on programs and information related to you and your region.
- Coordinate back-to-school plans with local partners, schools, providers, other community activities (like farmers' markets) and health department officials.

Resources

Looking for trusted info on vaccines?

Healthychildren.org: All About AAP Recommended Immunization Schedules

VaccineInformation.org: Vaccine Basics

California Department of Public Health: Tools for Schools (Resources & training)

Are you a clinician or health worker communicating with patients or families?

American Academy of Pediatrics: Immunization Discussion Guides

American Academy of Pediatrics: Talking with Vaccine Hesitant Parents

FrameWorks Institute: Reframing Childhood Immunization Toolkit

Crucial Conversations: Effective Communication Without Confrontation (CDPH & California Immunization Coalition)

Immunize.org: Need Help Responding to Vaccine-Hesitant Parents?

AAPC: Coding and Billing Pediatric Vaccinations

Parent's Guide to Back-to-School Vaccines

Q. Why is my child required to get vaccines before starting school?

Getting childhood vaccines on time helps kids stay healthy and allows them to focus on growing and learning at school. Schools bring children together to learn, play, and spend time in close contact with one another. Because contagious diseases can spread quickly in shared spaces like classrooms and playgrounds, schools require routine childhood vaccines to help keep students healthy and learning.

Q. Why is it important to stay up to date with vaccinations?

Vaccinations teach children's immune systems to recognize and resist contagious diseases. Vaccines are like training manuals for your body. They teach your child's immune system how to identify and prevent a specific illness. It's important that children and teens receive vaccinations on schedule so they can stay healthy, avoid serious illness, and keep learning, playing, and participating in school activities. When vaccination rates increase, it helps stop preventable diseases from spreading through communities.

Q. What happens when people stop getting vaccinated?

Although many diseases are no longer widespread in California communities thanks to vaccines, children still need vaccines to maintain their immunity and keep them protected and healthy. Diseases that are now less common here can still spread when vaccination rates fall. When a large portion of a community becomes immune to a contagious disease, it makes the spread of the disease less likely. This protects the whole community, including those who cannot be vaccinated, like a newborn baby, or a person with a weakened immune system, like someone being treated for cancer.

Q. What are the requirements for California schools?

Based on their age, students need to receive the following vaccines before the school year starts:

- Diphtheria, Tetanus and Pertussis
- Polio
- Hepatitis B
- Measles, Mumps and Rubella
- Varicella (Chickenpox)

For more information on age-related school vaccine requirements, visit CDPH School Vaccine Resources. You can access and print a digital copy of your child's California vaccine record at My Vaccine Record. Find a vaccine location near you at My Turn - California Vaccine Scheduling & Information Site.

In addition to vaccines, older children and teens may be required to have an annual physical to participate in a school or community sport. The summer before school starts is a great time to schedule an appointment. Remember to ask their pediatrician about recommended vaccines. When setting up appointments for an older child, ask if brothers or sisters can be scheduled to come in at the same time.

For babies and younger children, stay up to date on their well-child doctor's visits where routine vaccinations are a regular part of the check-up. That keeps them healthy and ready to start school or attend daycare without any delays, equipped with the recommended protections.

Q. There is so much information out there about vaccines. I don't know who to trust! Who should I talk to about vaccines for my kids?

The best person to discuss your questions with is your child's pediatrician or health care provider. Doctors and nurses track important health research and guidance, and they can share that information with you. Other trusted sources include the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). CDPH provides information for parents in multiple languages. AAP has a parent-facing website called HealthyChildren.org that offers information on childhood vaccines.

Q. How do I know that vaccine ingredients are safe for my children?

We all want what's best for children's health. Vaccines go through careful testing to make sure they're safe before they are approved for use. Once a vaccine is in use, it is still closely monitored for safety issues. All vaccine ingredients are listed on the label and are carefully tested. Talk with your child's pediatrician if you have specific concerns. Your pediatrician can answer your questions about the right plan for your child.

Q. How much will my child's vaccines cost? Are my child's vaccines covered by my insurance plan? What if I don't have insurance?

All routine childhood vaccines are covered by insurance in California – including those required for childcare and school – at no cost to families. Kids without insurance can still receive required vaccines at no cost from their pediatrician or primary care doctor through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program. California allows some pharmacies to provide vaccines through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program at select locations. VFC providers have the option to display their vaccines offered, hours, and patients accepted in the My Turn Vaccine Locator.

Q. What can I do to prepare for back-to-school for my kids?

When you register your child for school, remember to bring your child's vaccine records with you. You can view and print a digital copy of your child's California vaccine record at My Vaccine Record.

Q. Where can I schedule vaccines for my school-age children? Can I go to any pharmacy in California to get required school vaccines? What if my doctor doesn't offer back-to-school vaccines?

You can find vaccine locations and schedule appointments on My Turn. You are encouraged to call ahead to ensure that the pharmacist/location has the vaccines you need.

Q. What if someone in my family is undocumented?

CDPH does not share personally identifiable information from the vaccine registry with the federal government.

Clinician's Guide to Back-to-School Vaccines

Q. Why am I hearing so many questions about back-to-school vaccine requirements this year?

Recent federal uncertainty around vaccine policy has led to higher levels of public interest earlier than usual. California's school vaccine requirements have not changed. CDPH has information for parents in a number of different languages: Resources for Parents.

Q. How can I best support vaccination for children?

- Promote the many important benefits of vaccines at all levels in your health care delivery team.
- Send patients personalized reminders from their doctor talking about the benefits of vaccines.
- Start vaccination promotion efforts early to avoid the rush before the school year starts.
- Consider taking advantage of the back-to-school season by encouraging vaccination for younger siblings at the same visit.

Q. Will school and daycare vaccine requirements change in California due to shifts in federal vaccine policy?

California's school vaccine requirements have not changed. All vaccines recommended by CDPH, including those required for childcare or school, continue to be covered by insurance in California and aligned with the American Academy of Pediatrics vaccination schedule. For more information on school vaccine requirements, visit ShotsforSchool.org. For information and support for parents, including information in a range of languages, see the Resources for Parents.

Q. Are California school requirements different from AAP recommendations?

Both California Department of Public Health and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend additional vaccines beyond the baseline California school requirements. Share information about all recommended childhood vaccines that keep children healthy, including hepatitis A, COVID-19, and the annual flu vaccine. Preteens and teens should also get the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine to protect against certain cancers, as well as meningococcal vaccines to protect against brain infections and possible death.

Q. What is the childhood vaccine landscape for schools in my region?

Take a look at vaccination rates for schools in your community: How Is Your School Doing.

Q: Are there standing orders templates for back-to-school vaccine schedules that may improve vaccine access?

Immunize.org has standing orders templates (and support for using standing orders) that are consistent with the AAP 2026 Recommended Child and Adolescent Immunization Schedule, including

- DTaP (<age 7) and Tdap (age 7-18)
- Hib
- Hep A
- Hep B
- HPV
- IPV
- MMR
- MenACWY
- MenB
- PCV
- Rotavirus
- Varicella

Q: What are the best ways to help improve vaccine access for kids in my community?

If your medical office or clinic does not stock vaccines, consider providing vaccines within your own practice or determine ways you can direct patients to vaccine locations in your community.

- Connect with your local health department to identify vaccine locations in the community, including the local public health office itself as a location for kids to get vaccines.
- Work with community partners to identify opportunities to provide access to vaccines, such as farmers markets or hosting an event in the parking lot of a clinic.
- Work with school administrators and nurses to promote and provide vaccines at school-related vaccine events.
- Refer to My Turn to identify clinics, pharmacies, or other locations where families can access vaccines, including through the Vaccines for Children program (for children with Medi-Cal coverage or who don't have insurance).
    - Remind families to call ahead to ensure that the pharmacist/location has the vaccines in stock and offers Vaccines for Children or accepts their insurance.
    - California allows a limited number of pharmacies to provide childhood vaccines through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Pharmacy Pilot program at select locations.