

## Pediatricians urge Arizona families not to skip childhood vaccines during COVID-19

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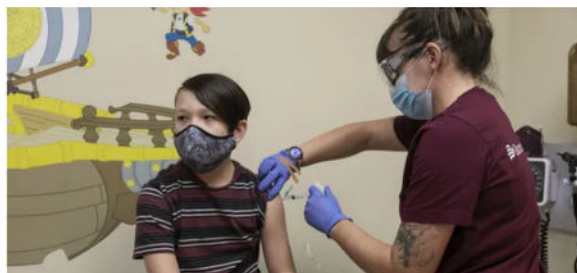
Robert Casdorff, 11, of Florence, has his 11-year-old vaccines administered by Christine Wells, a medical assistant at Banner Health Center in Queen Creek, on Aug. 12, 2020.



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Christine Wells, a medical assistant at Banner Health Center, holds the immunization records for Robert Casdorff of Florence after his appointment in Queen Creek on Aug. 12, 2020.





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Arizona families have been putting off their children's vaccinations during the pandemic and pediatricians are urging them, for the sake of public health, to stay up-to-date.

A worrisome drop in childhood vaccinations at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has somewhat rebounded, but rates are still below normal levels, said pediatrician Dr. Sarah Wiersma, vice chair of pediatrics for Scottsdale-based Honor Health.

"We still have a lot of families who have been putting off care, so that is still

a big concern," Wiersma said. "Especially right now. We don't know how long this (pandemic) is going to continue to last. If we thought it was going to be a month, that's one thing, but at this point, we don't want care delayed indefinitely."

Pediatricians emphasize that their offices are safe and that unvaccinated children could create public health problems beyond COVID-19.

"Everybody is really wanting a COVID vaccine and we have to remember we have vaccines against all these other really dangerous infectious diseases," said Dr. Rachel Lusk, a pediatrician with Valleywise Health in Phoenix, which is reaching out to families who are late on their children's vaccines.

"It's really important that we try to prevent outbreaks — it's so much better than having to deal with an outbreak if it does happen."

Data from Banner Health, Arizona's largest health delivery system, shows that vaccines administered to patients under the age of 18 were 12% lower in July than they were in July 2019. Similarly, well-child visits in Banner Health were down 14% in July compared with one year prior.

"There are definitely still some families that are very hesitant to come into the office and don't feel comfortable quite yet," said Dr. Russell Horton, a Banner Health pediatrician. "I try to reassure them that we can do it in a safe way and that it's still needed even if your child is healthy now."

Some families have been reluctant to go to in-person visits because they have no immediate medical concerns and do not want to take any additional risks, he said.

Many families have someone vulnerable at home, such as an elderly grandparent or a child with a chronic medical condition who would be at higher risk if they were to get infected, he said.

Wiersma, the Scottsdale pediatrician, is a board member for the Arizona Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which surveyed its members this year and found a 70% to 80% decline in visits to pediatric practices in March, April and May.

Those results were consistent with findings in a CDC [report](#) published in May that found what it called a "notable decrease" in orders for routine childhood vaccines at the onset of the pandemic.

"The identified declines in routine pediatric vaccine ordering and doses administered might indicate that U.S. children and their communities face increased risks for outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases," the CDC report says.

The report says the declines were more notable in older children than in those ages two and younger.

"Probably nationally what the CDC was seeing with vaccines was going on in Arizona," Wiersma said. "I don't have hard data on it, but in June and



July we have seen maybe a bit of a rebound in the rates, which is [kind of the same as nationally](#)."

In spite of that rebound, childhood vaccine rates appear to be below normal levels, Wiersma said.



The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the release of 2019-2020 school vaccination rates in Arizona, but state data in recent years has shown an increase in parents seeking to exempt their children from vaccines for non-medical reasons.

The Maricopa County Department of Public Health is reminding families about back-to-school vaccinations, which are available at [all three of its clinics](#) by appointment.

Anyone over the age of two is asked to wear a face mask and families are asked to bring their own pen, the child's vaccination record and health insurance information.

The Arizona Department of Health Services has begun issuing messages on social media reminding parents that vaccines are not only safe, but protect children from dangerous and potentially deadly diseases, including measles and whooping cough.

"Pediatricians and infectious disease experts nationally are just really worried, especially with kids going back to things, that we're going to have outbreaks of some of these illnesses," Wiersma said.

"Usually we've been seeing every few years small pertussis (whooping cough) outbreaks around here, but if people are not up-to-date on their vaccines then we're going to have even less herd immunity and we might have more issues with problems like infants getting pertussis."

"Herd immunity" refers to having enough people vaccinated that it prevents an outbreak. Depending on the illness, vaccination rates typically need to be 80% to 95% to have enough herd immunity to protect people who aren't vaccinated.

In addition to routine childhood vaccines, public health officials will soon be urging anyone over the age of six months to get a flu shot, Wiersma said.

"This fall, as everyone goes back to things, we're going to have flu coming,"

she said. "So COVID plus flu is going to be potentially a pretty rough winter."

Wiersma said her pediatric practice will be doing drive-thru flu vaccines. She said families should check with their pediatrician about options.

The childhood "wellness" or "well-child" visits that families are putting off or skipping do not just include vaccinations.

Those visits are also when pediatricians catch potential illnesses like Type 1 diabetes and childhood cancers before they progress, Wiersma said.

"Families are often worried about coming into the office for things that seem like a mild illness before it gets too serious," she said.

"I have seen some studies and heard about a lot more serious illnesses in kids presenting because people waited too long."

Horton said he's recently had patients get a later-than-normal diagnosis for developmental concerns such as speech delays, but nothing as urgent as Type 1 diabetes or leukemia, he said.

Pediatricians emphasize that families should not fear going in for appointments, whether for vaccines or other concerns. For some issues, telehealth (virtual visits) will be available, they said. Families with concerns, such as having a high-risk person at home, should call their pediatrician's office for advice, they say.

At Valleywise Health, patients are screened on the phone and screened when they enter buildings for appointments, and sick children are kept away from children who are well, Lusk said. The staff constantly is cleaning and disinfecting to protect patients and wears personal protective equipment, she said.

"We are taking every precaution we can to keep families safe when they are in the clinic," she said.

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