

Open Letter to Americans in Recognition of National Immunization Awareness Month

We, the undersigned, support immunizations as the safest, most effective way to control and eradicate infectious diseases. This August, as another National Immunization Awareness Month comes to a close, we are reminded that diseases such as smallpox and polio were once commonplace in the United States. Thanks to vaccinations, we have not seen or experienced many of the infectious diseases that gripped past generations, but other countries have not been so fortunate and outbreaks continue in the United States.

As we approach the 30th anniversaries of global smallpox eradication and the last polio case reported in the United States, new infectious diseases, such as novel H1N1 influenza, are emerging and others continue to strike the unprotected. This should remind us of the continuing importance of timely immunizations. Our strong immunization infrastructure will ensure our ability to meet the challenges presented by these diseases, but Americans have to do their part by getting themselves and their loved ones vaccinated.

Childhood and adult infectious diseases pose a real threat to personal and public health. Those who are not vaccinated leave not only themselves, but others vulnerable to dangerous diseases. Vaccines are the most effective option for preventing and stopping the spread of infectious diseases.

Vaccines Save Lives

- Immunization has cut measles incidence in the U.S. by 99.9%. However, vaccination is still essential as illustrated by the number of measles cases hitting a decade high in 2008.
- Immunization wiped out smallpox in 1979. Before smallpox was eradicated, it killed over 300 million people in the 20th century – more than all wars combined.
- Vaccination eradicated paralytic polio from the Western Hemisphere. Before a vaccine was available, polio affected as many as 57,000 Americans per year with paralytic disease.
- Without routine vaccination, infectious diseases can quickly return and cause widespread harm. Whooping cough rates have increased dramatically over the past thirty years, from a low of 1,000 cases to over 10,000 in 2008. According to a study published in the June 2009 edition of *Pediatrics*, children who are not immunized against whooping cough are 23 times more likely to contract the debilitating disease.
- Immunization has nearly eliminated a major cause of childhood meningitis, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, everywhere the vaccine is used. Before the vaccine became available, 20,000 cases of the disease were reported and nearly 600 died each year in the United States. Unfortunately, cases of this deadly disease are resurfacing in the United States due to lower vaccination rates.
- Influenza continues to take the lives of more than 36,000 Americans each year. This can be prevented only through annual vaccination against this deadly disease.

Together, we can protect ourselves and each other from potentially deadly diseases. Please make sure you and your loved ones are immunized on time, every time. For more information about vaccines and immunization, we recommend that you talk to your health care provider, or local or state health agency.

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