

PARENT/PUBLIC INFORMATION
IMPLEMENTATION OF RCW 70.95M.115 (ESSB 5305)
Limiting the Use of Mercury-Containing Vaccines
January 2007

What is mercury and what is thimerosal?¹

Mercury is a naturally occurring element found in the earth's crust, air, soil and water. Mercury has been released into the environment through volcanic eruptions, weathering of rocks and burning of coal. Once released, certain types of bacteria in the environment can change mercury to methylmercury. Methylmercury makes its way through the food chain in fish, animals, and humans. At high levels, it can be toxic to people.

Thimerosal — a preservative still used in some vaccines — is a mercury-containing organic compound which has a different form of mercury called ethylmercury. Studies comparing ethylmercury and methylmercury suggest that they are processed differently in the human body. Ethylmercury is broken down and excreted much more rapidly than methylmercury. It appears that ethylmercury (the type of mercury in the influenza vaccine) is removed from the body more quickly than methylmercury (the type of mercury in the environment).

What does the law require?

The law requires that pregnant women and children under 3 years of age be given only vaccines that are considered mercury-free or thimerosal-free. The law defines “thimerosal-free” vaccines as having no more than 0.5 micrograms of mercury per 0.5 milliliter dose. The law makes an exception for mercury content of influenza vaccine and allows pregnant women and children under age three to get influenza vaccine if it has less than 1.0 microgram of mercury per 0.5 milliliter dose.

The law also states that in the case of a “public health emergency,” the secretary of the Department of Health may suspend the law’s mercury limits “for the duration of the emergency.”

The law is effective starting July 1, 2007.

Which vaccines have more mercury in them than the law allows?

At this point, only the following three vaccines have too much mercury in them:

- o multi-dose vials of influenza vaccines (although there are influenza vaccines that are mercury-free);
- o Menomune, a meningococcal vaccine that protects against meningitis; and
- o a vaccine that protects against Japanese Encephalitis.

¹ Information about mercury, methylmercury thimerosal and ethylmercury stated in the answer to this question was taken from the following two sources: Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia at <http://www.chop.edu/consumer/index.jsp> and the Food and Drug Administration at www.fda.gov/cber/vaccine/thimerosal.htm

It is possible that new vaccines could become available that exceed the thimerosal content allowed under this law. However, until these become available, it is impossible to speculate on the impacts of the law on these vaccines.

How does the law affect me and my family?

Few vaccines are now manufactured with more mercury than the law allows. However, the law may affect you or your family in the following ways:

1. If you are pregnant or become pregnant after July 1, 2007, you must get a mercury-free flu shot (a flu shot with no more than 1.0 microgram of mercury per 0.5 milliliter dose).
2. If you have a child who will be under three years of age after July 1, 2007, he or she must get a mercury-free flu shot (a flu shot with no more than 1.0 microgram of mercury per 0.5 milliliter dose).
3. You (or your child) may not get vaccinated against Japanese Encephalitis in Washington State if, after July 1, 2007, you are:
 - o traveling to certain countries in Asia where Japanese Encephalitis occurs, AND
 - o you will be staying in these countries longer than one month, AND
 - o you are pregnant, OR
 - o your child is under age three.
4. If you have a child who will be under three years of age after July 1, 2007 and who is at high risk for Meningococcal disease, he or she cannot get vaccinated against the disease in Washington State. Meningococcal vaccine is not routinely recommended for children under three unless they are at high risk. Ask your doctor or nurse if your child is at high risk for Meningococcal disease.

Where can I get more information?

For more information about vaccines, go to: www.doh.wa.gov/immunize

To find an immunization clinic, call: 1-800-322-2588