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State extends deadline for mercury in vaccines

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BY [JIM RITTER](#) Health Reporter

Responding to concerns that mercury in vaccines might cause autism, the Illinois Legislature last year passed a law to phase out the preservative. But on Jan. 1, the day the phase-out was to take effect, the head of the Illinois Public Health Department declared the state will be exempt from the law for 12 months.

Mercury generally has been phased out of vaccines given to preschoolers. The law requires that beginning this year, all vaccines for all ages contain, at most, trace amounts of mercury. All vaccines must be completely mercury-free by Jan. 1, 2008.

However, the law allowed Health Department director Dr. Eric Whitaker to issue an exemption if the phase-out would lead to vaccine shortages. Whitaker determined the phase-out could cause shortages of this season's flu shot and lesser-used vaccines for diphtheria, tetanus, meningitis and Japanese encephalitis.

'Hugely disappointed'

Such shortages "could reasonably constitute an actual or potential public health emergency," Whitaker said. The Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics praised Whitaker's decision.

But bill sponsor Rep. Kurt Granberg (D-Carlyle) said he was "hugely disappointed."

A mercury-containing preservative called thimerosal has been used in some vaccines since the 1930s. Autism activists note some symptoms of mercury poisoning are similar to autism, and an increase in autism cases in past years coincided with the growing use of vaccines containing mercury.

However, a 2004 Institute of Medicine report concluded that studies involving hundreds of thousands of children generally have found no link between vaccines and autism.

Without Whitaker's exemption, the law would have limited mercury to no more than 1.25 micrograms of mercury per dose. (A microgram is 1 millionth of a gram.) Most flu shots contain 25 micrograms, although a flu shot for kids is mercury-free.

Manufacturers plan to make flu shots mercury-free by next fall, but there's no guarantee they will succeed in meeting this goal, state health officials said.

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