

Health experts warn Florida's plan to recommend against Covid-19 vaccine for healthy kids is irresponsible

Travis Caldwell, CNN March 8, 2022

After Florida Surgeon General Dr. Joseph Ladapo declared on Monday the state would issue guidance urging parents not to vaccinate their children against Covid-19, health experts and officials were quick to highlight the dangers of such a policy for individuals and for country at large.

Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, said Ladapo's statement is "wholly irresponsible and completely unsupported."

"Although it is true that children are less likely to be infected and it is true that children are less likely to be severely infected, they can still be infected, and they can still be severely infected," Offit told CNN.

Florida to recommend against Covid-19 vaccine for healthy children

Coronavirus cases and hospitalizations continue to plummet from peaks of the Omicron surge, and states and local jurisdictions have increasingly pulled back on Covid-19 safety measures. But Florida would be the first state to break from US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance on Covid-19 vaccines for children, which are recommended for those ages 5 and up.

"And if you have a vaccine which is safe, which this is, and is effective, which this is, then you give it," Offit said. "What the Florida surgeon general didn't do was in any sense explain himself. What possible reason could he have for not giving this vaccine to children and putting them in a position where they have to suffer this disease?"

Ladapo spoke Monday at the end of a roundtable session amongst vocal skeptics of Covid-19 mitigation measures. He did not say when the new guidance from the state's department of health would become official and provided few additional details.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has consistently had a more hands-off approach with Covid-19 regulations during the pandemic, said during a Monday afternoon press conference that Ladapo was concerned the vaccine was "being pushed on people."

When teens blow off pleas to get Covid-19 vaccines, the consequences can be deadly

"We are not just going to follow the CDC in the state of Florida," DeSantis said. "We're going to do our own stuff."

The Florida chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, however, expressed doubts over whether the decision is the best path forward.

"The COVID-19 vaccine is our best hope for ending the pandemic," Dr. Lisa Gwynn, chapter president, said in a statement. "The Surgeon General's comments today misrepresent the benefits of the vaccine, which has been proven to prevent serious illness, hospitalizations and long-term

symptoms from COVID-19 in children and adolescents, including those who are otherwise healthy.

"The evidence is clear that when people are vaccinated, they are significantly less likely to get very sick and need hospital care. There is widespread consensus among medical and public health experts about the life-saving benefits of this vaccine."

Recent data demonstrates benefits of vaccinations in children

Although the Omicron variant is more capable of evading protection provided by vaccines, recent data has shown vaccinated children are less likely to be hospitalized for Covid-19 infections than children who are unvaccinated.

Vaccinated grade-schoolers are nearly half as likely to have a Covid-19 case that resulted in care at an urgent care clinic or emergency room compared with children who were unvaccinated, according to a large study funded by the CDC.

Children infected by Covid-19 can develop multisystem inflammatory syndrome weeks later. This rare disease can lead to dangerous complications, causing parts of the body to become inflamed. MIS-C can affect major organs including the kidneys, brain, lungs and heart.

Since the authorization of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine in November to those as young as 5 years old, about 22 million children have become fully vaccinated, including 1.1 million kids in Florida, according to federal and state health data. About 25% of Florida's eligible child population is vaccinated, compared with 30% nationally.

As Omicron cases fall, doctors anxiously await possible surge of dangerous child complication MIS-C

Dr. William Schaffner, a professor in the division of infectious disease at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, told CNN he is "disappointed and actually concerned" by Florida's announcement.

"I would continue to make it to all parents of children 5 and older. The benefits clearly outweigh the risks, and they provide us a firmer foundation for the control of Covid going forward," Schaffner said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki was also critical when asked Monday of the Florida surgeon general's decision.

"It's deeply disturbing that there are politicians peddling conspiracy theories out there and casting doubt on vaccinations when it's our best tool against the virus and the best tool to prevent even teenagers from being hospitalized," Psaki said.

Asked whether it was a good policy, Psaki replied, "Absolutely not. We know the science. We know the data and what works and what the most effective steps are in protecting people of a range of ages from a hospitalization and even death."

Psaki noted that the Food and Drug Administration and the CDC have "already weighed in on the safety and efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines for those five and older" and noted the science backing up the need for vaccines in children.