

Pharmacists in all 50 states are now allowed to give childhood vaccinations under a new directive aimed at preventing future outbreaks of measles and other preventable diseases.

Alex Azar, the head of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, took the step using emergency powers he has during the U.S. coronavirus epidemic, which was declared a public health emergency. The directive announced Wednesday will temporarily preempt restrictions in 22 states starting this fall. The move is designed to help prevent vaccination rates from falling during the pandemic, Azar said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that orders for childhood vaccines from doctors' offices plummeted in late March and early April as their offices closed or saw fewer patients, raising concerns that vaccination rates would fall.

But a survey of pediatricians in May suggested that most offices were open and able to give recommended shots, and more than half were able to take on new patients if needed.

The authorization allows state-licensed pharmacies to administer childhood vaccines without a doctor's prescription. Pharmacists must first complete a training program, although many already have, Azar said.

The measure does not OK pharmacists to give shots to children younger than 3. Some of the most important childhood vaccinations are given to babies and toddlers, but pharmacists don't have the training or medical support to administer doses to young children, said Dr. Brett Giroir, the HHS Assistant Secretary for Health.

The American Academy of Pediatrics on Wednesday issued a statement criticizing the directive.

"Pediatricians' offices are open and safe. We have all necessary childhood and adolescent vaccines in stock with trained medical professionals who can administer them," said the organization's president, Dr. Sally Goza. "Rather than create an unnecessary alternative method to deliver immunizations to children, our federal government should invest in the one we have: pediatricians."