Measles is a highly communicable respiratory disease caused by a virus and spread through the air. Measles starts with a high fever, runny nose, cough, red eyes, and sore throat. Serious complications can arise from measles, especially for those with compromised immune systems due to other illnesses such as cancer. While this disease was figured to be eliminated from the United States in 2000, the number of measles cases reported in 2014 was approximately 300, largely due to individuals not getting vaccinated for the disease. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention stated, “Ninety percent of all measles cases in the United States were in people who were not vaccinated.” Measles travelled into 18 states, with New York, California, and Ohio having the most cases.

The rise in non-vaccinated children came following a report on the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine in the 1998 medical journal The Lancet by Andrew Wakefield and a dozen co-authors. The paper postulated that the MMR vaccine was causing autism. “In eight children, the onset of behavioral problems had been linked, either by the parents or by the child’s physician, with measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination,” the authors wrote. Shortly after its publication, a number of large epidemiological studies were undertaken, all of which found no link between the MMR vaccine and autism. In 2004, the article was officially retracted with editor-in-chief Richard Horton calling it, “utterly false” and maintaining that the journal had been “deceived” by the fraudulent research. Even though the scientific community has accepted the belief that MMR is linked to autism, the American public has latched on to that idea, preferring to approach the complicated topic of vaccines and disease cautiously. A study conducted by the National Consumers League survey in 2014 found that a third of parents with children under the age of 18 believe that vaccines cause autism.

Getting vaccinated for measles and other diseases does not only protect the individual, but those around them as well. For instance, Rhett Krawitt is a 6-year-old boy who suffered from leukemia and now shows signs of remission. However, due to his cancer, Krawitt has a weakened immune system that cannot withstand illness. This prevents him from obtaining vaccines because he doesn’t have the proper antibodies to ward off the tiny traces of virus presented by a vaccine. Krawitt happens to live in California where many measles cases have been diagnosed. This is an issue because many of the students at his school are not vaccinated which poses a threat to Krawitt and anyone else who is susceptible to disease. Therefore, children such as Krawitt are inhibited from attending school because they face the threat of contracting measles or another disease that could be easily avoided if people were to get vaccinated. The topic of vaccines is currently being debated across the country.

The Measles Outbreak
Sarah Hamilton, '15

The Process of Creating Vaccines
Sarah Hamilton, '15

Not getting vaccinated is an unpopular decision in today’s climate. Parents who choose to opt out of vaccinating their children are seen as irresponsible and careless, and their unvaccinated kids a walking liability to the most vulnerable members of our population. For most of my life, I was one of those unvaccinated kids. In elementary school, when my friends missed school to go to the doctor’s office for a dreaded shot, I proudly claimed that I had never had a shot. “But you have,” my friend said. “No you don’t,” I assured them, happy to spread the word and educate my peers.

My reads as a decision not to vaccinate me as a child was based on the logical instinct that it could not be good to put 14 vaccines, through a total of 26 inoculations, into the tiny body of her newborn. This is the number of vaccines recommended for children in their first two years of life. Her decision was also based on a not-irrational distrust of pharmaceutical companies, fear of serious and unpredictable side effects of new drugs, and rumors about linkages between immunizations and autism. She chose instead put her faith in a holistic lifestyle and supporting a naturally strong immune system.

Over the course of the last several years, I have gradually received most of the vaccines for my circumstances, a freedom I appreciate. However, the recent recurrence of old diseases, and the argument that opting out of immunizations endanger people who are unable to get vaccinated has made me think more critically about my vaccine-less early years. While I’d like to think that I owe my health to my own highly functioning white blood cells, maybe I also have my elementary school peers who did suffer through those many uncomfortable needle sticks to thank.