

Communicable Diseases

Varicella (Chicken Pox) Vaccine

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Vaccines (also called “needles” or “baby shots”) are the best way to protect against some very serious infections. The Canadian Paediatric Society and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization strongly recommend routine immunization.

The varicella (chicken pox) vaccine is given to children after their first birthday. It will protect them from this common childhood disease and its potential for serious complications, such as bacterial skin infections.

What is Varicella?

Chicken pox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. About 90 per cent of chicken pox cases occur before the age of 12. The chicken pox virus causes fatigue, mild headaches, fever, chills and muscle/joint aches a day or two before an itchy, red rash appears. The rash can appear anywhere on the body as raised blisters that are extremely itchy. Some children have only a few blisters while others can have as many as 500.

Chicken pox is very contagious. It is spread easily from several days before the rash appears until five days after. It is spread through the air when someone with chicken pox coughs or sneezes, or through contact with fluid from the chicken pox blisters. While most people recover from the virus after one week, some develop serious complications from chicken pox. These complications may include severe skin infections, scars, pneumonia, and encephalitis (a swelling of the brain).

A person who has had chicken pox can get a painful rash called shingles years later. Adolescents, adults, pregnant women, and people with immune system problems are at greater risk of serious complications.

At what age should my child be vaccinated with the Varicella Vaccine?

The provincial government pays for one dose of varicella vaccine for children and is routinely scheduled at 15 months of age. It is also publicly funded for children five years of age who have not had chicken pox already.

This vaccine may be given with other vaccines on the same day but in separate sites using separate needles.

Your child should not receive any other vaccines for at least 28 days.

The vaccine is also publicly funded those who have a high risk medical condition, such as:

- children and adolescents given chronic salicylic acid therapy – consider stopping treatment for six weeks after vaccination
- all individuals with cystic fibrosis
- immunocompromised individuals – this should be determined on an individual basis. The vaccine (a live, attenuated vaccine) is recommended for some immunocompromised persons, but contraindicated for others. Please discuss this with your family health care provider.

The chickenpox vaccine costs \$60.00 for those people who do not meet these criteria. Children aged 12 months to 12 years will be protected from chickenpox with one dose of vaccine. Those 13 years of age or older should receive two doses at least 28 days apart. People who know they have had chickenpox are protected from the disease. People 12 years of age and older who did not have chickenpox, or who are uncertain if they had it, can have a blood test to see if they need the vaccine.

How well does Varicella vaccine protect my child?

The vaccine also gives 95 per cent protection against severe Varicella for at least seven to 10 years after vaccination. It is estimated that the Varicella vaccine will offer 70 to 90 per cent protection against chicken pox of any severity.

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Is the Varicella vaccine safe?

Yes. Serious side effects are rare. Mild pain, swelling, and redness for a few days are common at the spot where the needle was given. Some children get a fever, rash, lose their appetite, or are fussy or drowsy for a day or two after the vaccination. A few people may develop a chickenpox-like rash up to 26 days after vaccination. Your family health care provider may suggest you give your child a medicine called acetaminophen to prevent pain and fever.

Call your family health care provider or local hospital if you or your child has any of the following within three days of getting the needle:

- high fever (over 40°C or 104°F)
- crying for more than three hours
- convulsions or seizures
- very pale color and serious drowsiness
- hives (itchy rash)
- swelling of the face or mouth
- trouble breathing
- other serious problems

Who should not get the Varicella vaccine?

Your family health care provider may decide not to give you or your child's needle or may give a different vaccine if you or your child has:

- a high fever or serious infection worse than a cold
- had a serious allergic reaction to this vaccine in the past
- a severe allergy to any parts of the vaccine including gelatin, sugar, urea, glutamate, bovine serum or an antibiotic called neomycin (Varivax III) OR lactose, latex, polyalcohol, human albumin, or neomycin (Varilrix)
- religious or philosophical objections to any part of the vaccine
- a disease that lowers the body's ability to fight infections, or is taking medicine with the same effect
- received a blood or plasma transfusion or immune globulin up to five months ago
- taken acetylsalicylic acid (ASA). Vaccine recipients should avoid using ASA for six weeks after

receiving chickenpox vaccine, unless prescribed by a physician.

- child under 12 months of age
- received the MMR vaccine in the past month

If you are pregnant, you should not have the vaccine. Pregnancy should be avoided for one month following vaccinations. Breastfeeding women can receive the vaccine but should they develop a rash after vaccination it is important they keep it covered.

***Individuals taking long-term antiviral therapy active against herpes viruses (e.g. acyclovir, valacyclovir or famciclovir) should discontinue these drugs, if possible, for at least 24 hours before receiving the vaccine and four weeks after the vaccine. Consult your health care provider before receiving the vaccine.**

Whom should I talk to if I have any more questions about the Varicella vaccine?

Talk to your family health care provider or the Huron County Health Unit (519-482-3416) for more information.

Your Record of Protection

After your child receives any immunization, make sure the doctor updates the yellow personal Immunization Record card. Keep it in a safe place!