

Varicella (Chickenpox)

for parents and caregivers...

What is chickenpox?

Varicella, also known as chickenpox, is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. Although it is a common childhood illness, it can cause serious complications and even death.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

The illness begins with fever and general unwellness for a day or two followed by a rash. The rash starts out as small pimples then changes to blisters with a red base. The rash usually starts on the head moves to the trunk and then on to the limbs.

Is it serious?

Chickenpox is usually, but not always, a mild self-limited disease in healthy children. The severity of disease and risk of complications are usually greater in adults. Complications can include severe infection, pneumonia, low platelet count and inflammation of the joints, kidneys and liver.

Occasionally complications lead to death: about 2 per 100,000 in normal healthy children and up to 15 per 100,000 in adults. The rash can leave mild scarring in some skin types. Shingles is a long-term complication that is not immediately apparent but can appear decades after the disease.

How do you catch it?

Chickenpox is spread by coughing and sneezing or by direct contact with weeping blisters. It is usually infectious from 2 days before the rash appears until the blisters have crusted over (about 5-7 days). If one person has chickenpox, about 85% of their close contacts will get it too, unless they have already had the disease (or relevant vaccine).

How do you treat it?

Try to prevent scratching and infection of the blisters – give lukewarm baths containing bicarbonate of soda or other prescribed anti-pruritic (anti-itching) medication. Keep the patient cool and give plenty of drinks.

How common is it?

In a typical year in New Zealand there are around 50,000 chickenpox infections, of which 150-200 result in hospitalisation, 1-2 cases result in long term disability or death and 1 case results in severe congenital varicella syndrome every 2 years.

Who is most at risk from chickenpox?

Less than one-tenth in children with a disease associated with immune-suppression and about two-thirds of the complications from chickenpox occur in otherwise healthy children. Chickenpox can cause severe and even fatal disease in pregnant women and immune suppressed individuals (e.g. children with acute leukaemia, or in those having steroid treatment in tablet or injection form.) When a pregnant non-immune woman becomes infected with chickenpox during weeks 8-20 of pregnancy there is a 1-2 per 100 chance of fetal abnormalities (e.g. scars on the baby, eye problems, poor growth, underdevelopment of a limb, small head size, delayed development or intellectual impairment.)

Some babies may have only one of these abnormalities, some may have them all. There is a very high risk of serious infant disease if the mother has chickenpox between the 5th day before delivery and two days afterwards.

Vaccines against chickenpox

A vaccine given by injection is available from 9 months old to 12 years old and requires 1 dose. Those over 13 years old require 2 doses given 6 to 8 weeks apart. The vaccine costs approximately \$60-\$90 per dose. If given within 3-5 days of exposure the vaccine may prevent or reduce, the severity of chickenpox. There are two chickenpox vaccines available in New Zealand and they have similar safety and efficacy profiles.

How effective are the vaccines against chickenpox?

Most people (95%) who have this vaccine will not get chickenpox. If a vaccinated person does get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. Follow-up studies also show that almost all vaccinated individuals remain immune for at least 20 years.

Who should have the vaccine?

Children 9 months old to 12 years old (1 dose), people 13 years of age and over (2 doses). Adults who are working with children and have never had chickenpox disease should consider vaccination.

Who should not have the vaccine?

- People who have had a severe allergic reaction that includes respiratory and/or cardiac symptoms to any of the vaccine components.
- Pregnant women should wait until after giving birth before having the vaccine.
- Women should avoid getting pregnant for 4 weeks after having the vaccine.
- People who are moderately or severely ill should usually wait until they recover before having chickenpox vaccine.

Who should seek specialist advice before having the vaccine?

- Have a disease that affects the immune system
- Are being treated with drugs that affect the immune system e.g. steroids for 2 weeks or more
- Have any type of cancer
- Are having cancer treatment with x-rays or drugs
- Have recently had a transfusion or have been given other blood products.
- Are living with a household member who is immunocompromised and not immune to chickenpox.

Varicella	Effects of disease	Side effects of the vaccine
<p>A highly contagious virus that causes a low-grade fever and vesicular rash which could potentially leave scars. Reactivation of the virus later in life causes shingles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Around 1 in 5,000 develop encephalitis (brain inflammation.) • About 2 in 50,000 patients die or suffer permanent disability. • Infection during pregnancy can result in congenital malformations (1-2 per 100). • Infection in a pregnant woman from 5 days before to 2 days after delivery can result in severe infection in the newborn baby in up to one third of cases. • Shingles, in later life causing severe pain which can be prolonged and disabling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 1 in 5 has a local reaction. • About 14 per 100 vaccine recipients experience fever. • A mild varicella-like rash may develop in 3-5 per 100 recipients. • Mild local reactions are quite common. • Around 1 in 10,000 may have a febrile seizure. • Anaphylaxis is rarely seen less than 1 per million.

Vaccines are prescription medicines. Talk to your doctor, midwife or nurse about the benefits or any risks.