



...for Parents and Caregivers



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Chickenpox (Varicella)

Fact Sheet: Parents and Caregivers

What is Chickenpox?

Varicella, known as chickenpox, is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. 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, which starts out as small pimples, then changes to blisters with a red base. The rash usually starts on the head and then trunk and then moves 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, 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 droplet infection (coughing and sneezing) and also 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 had the disease (or the 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 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?

About two-thirds of the complications from chickenpox occur in otherwise healthy children, and less than one-tenth in children with a disease associated with immune-suppression.

Chickenpox can cause severe and even fatal disease in pregnant women and immune suppressed individuals (eg, children with acute leukaemia, or in those having steroid treatment in tablet or injection form)

Pregnant non-immune women. Where the mother has chickenpox in weeks 8-20 of pregnancy, there is a 1-2% chance of fetal abnormalities, eg scars, eye problems, poor growth, underdevelopment of an arm or leg, small head size, delayed development or mental retardation. (Some babies have only one of these defects, some 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 for those aged from 9 months to 12 years (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 modify, the severity of chickenpox. There are two chickenpox vaccines available and they have similar safety and efficacy profiles.

How Effective are the Vaccines Against it?

Most people (95%) who have this vaccine will not get chickenpox, but if a vaccinated person does get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. More than 20 years after immunisation, studies in Japan show lasting immunity. In the USA where the vaccine has not been in use as long, follow-up studies also show that almost all vaccinated individuals remain immune.

Who Should get the Vaccine?

Children aged 9 months to 12 years inclusive (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 Shouldn't have the Vaccine?

- People who have had a severe allergic reaction (including respiratory and/or cardiac symptoms) to any of the vaccine components.
- Pregnant women should wait until after giving birth before having the vaccine and they should not get pregnant for 3 months 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?

People who live with a household member who is immunocompromised and not immune to chickenpox, should discuss options further with their doctor. Immunosuppressed non-immune individuals can get chickenpox transmitted from a vaccinee, and may be quite ill - as they would if they caught chickenpox disease from anyone. So this can be a dilemma. People should check with their doctor if they:

- Have HIV/AIDS or any 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 kind of cancer
- Are having cancer treatment with x-rays or drugs
- Have recently had a transfusion or have been given other blood products

What Are The Possible Side Effects From The Vaccine?

Pain and swelling at the injection site is not uncommon (1:5 children, 1:3 adults) This is an indication that the immune system has recognised, and is responding to the vaccine

- Fever : 1:10 or less
- Mild rash - very rarely infectious (1:20 or less)
- Seizure caused by fever (1:1,000 or less)
- Pneumonia (extremely rare)

Comparison of Effects of Disease and Vaccine

Chickenpox	Effects of Disease	Side Effects of Vaccination
<p>Caused by highly contagious virus, causes low-grade fever and vesicular rash, which sometimes leaves scars.</p> <p>Reactivation of the virus late in life causes shingles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 in 5000 develop encephalitis (brain inflammation) • About 2 in 500,000 patients die or suffer permanent disability. Infection during pregnancy can result in congenital malformations (1-2 per 100). • Infection in the mother from 5 days before to 2 days after delivery results in severe infection in the newborn baby in up to one third of cases • Shingles causes severe pain often prolonged and disabling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 1 in 5 has a local reaction or fever. • 1 in 10,000 may have a febrile seizure • A mild varicella-like rash may develop in 3-5 per 100 recipients • Mild local reactions are quite common

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

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