

Chickenpox (Varicella)

Immunisation information

The National Immunisation Program Schedule provides free chickenpox vaccine for children at 18 months of age and a catch-up dose for adolescents in Year 7 of secondary school who have never had chickenpox and are not already vaccinated.

Chickenpox (Varicella)

Chickenpox is a highly contagious infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is spread through coughs and sneezes and through direct contact with the fluid in the blisters of the rash.

It is usually a mild disease of short duration in healthy children; sometimes chickenpox will develop into more severe illness such as bacterial skin infections resulting in scarring, pneumonia or inflammation of the brain. Adults who contract chickenpox generally experience more severe symptoms. Chickenpox may also be a risk to the unborn baby if contracted during pregnancy. Chickenpox can cause serious illness and even death in all ages.

The incubation period for chickenpox is 10 to 21 days, followed by the appearance of a rash of red spots initially, then becoming blisters within hours. The spots usually appear on the trunk, face and other parts of the body. Most people infected with chickenpox have a fever and feel unwell and may experience severe itching.

Anyone who has never had chickenpox before can catch it. **Any person with a reliable history of chickenpox infection is considered immune and does not require the vaccine.** About 75% of people catch chickenpox before 12 years of age.

Chickenpox vaccine

The chickenpox vaccine contains modified live virus at a reduced strength and a small amount of the antibiotic, neomycin.

Vaccine recommendations

It is recommended that a single dose of chickenpox vaccine be given to:

- Children aged 18 months unless they have already had chickenpox infection
- Children in Year 7 of secondary school, unless they have already received a dose of chickenpox vaccine or had the infection

*The chickenpox vaccine is **funded** under the National Immunisation Program Schedule for children turning 18 months of age and school children in Year 7. Chickenpox vaccine for children outside these age groups, and for people aged 14 years and over must be purchased privately.*

Adolescents (14 years +) and adults

The vaccine is also recommended for adolescents (14 years and older) and adults who have not been vaccinated against chickenpox or who have not had the disease. Persons in this age category with no known history of chickenpox should have a blood test to check for immunity. Many adults who do not have a history of chickenpox are actually immune.

Chickenpox vaccine is especially indicated for non-immune people and people in high-risk occupations such as:

- Health-care workers
- Teachers and workers in child-care centres
- Non-immune women prior to pregnancy
- Non-immune parents of young children
- Non-immune household contacts of immunosuppressed people

People aged 14 years and older require **two doses** of the chickenpox vaccine, one to two months apart.

Possible side effects of chickenpox vaccine

Reactions are generally mild and well tolerated and are much less frequent than the complications of the disease.

Common side effects

- High fever over 39°C
- Soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- A temporary small lump at the injection site

Uncommon side effects

- About two to five chickenpox like spots may occur usually at the injection site and sometimes on other parts of the body between five to 26 days after vaccination, in up to 5% of children.

In these circumstances, the onset of a rash following chickenpox vaccine would indicate that the person should avoid immunocompromised people for the duration of the rash.

A very mild dose of chickenpox may occur one or more years after vaccination, as the vaccine is not fully effective in every person.

Extremely rare side effect

- Severe allergic reaction

If mild reactions do occur, they may last one to two days. The side effects can be reduced by:

- Drinking extra fluids
- Not overdressing
- Placing a cold wet cloth on the sore injection site
- Taking paracetamol to reduce any discomfort (note the recommended dose for the weight of your child)

If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or hospital.

Pre-immunisation checklist

Before you or your child is immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

- Are unwell on the day of immunisation (temperature over 38.5° C)
- Has any severe allergies
- Has had a severe reaction following any vaccine
- Has a disease or is having a treatment which causes low immunity (for example HIV/AIDS, leukaemia, cancer, radiotherapy or chemotherapy)
- Is taking steroids of any sort other than inhaled asthma sprays or steroid creams (for example cortisone or prednisone)
- Are pregnant, or planning to become pregnant within one month of immunisation (and are actually receiving the vaccine)
- Has received immunoglobulin or a blood transfusion or any blood products in the past year.

People who are receiving immunisation should remain at the place of immunisation for a period of 15 minutes.

The following websites offer resources and further information

www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation
www.immunise.health.gov.au



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