

Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine

Public Health – Factsheet

Immunization has saved more lives in Canada in the last 50 years than any other medical intervention¹. Vaccines help your immune system to recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause diseases.

What is the varicella vaccine?

The varicella vaccine protects against chickenpox.

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella virus. It can lead to serious infection and in rare cases can be fatal.

Chickenpox causes an itchy rash that turns into small fluid-filled blisters, as well as fever and headache.

Most people recover from chickenpox without any other problems. But, in more severe cases, chickenpox can lead to serious infections of the skin, joints, lungs (pneumonia), blood, bone, or even heart. In rare cases, it may also cause swelling of the brain (encephalitis).

If pregnant women become infected, their unborn babies can be very seriously harmed. Women infected early in their pregnancies may have babies born with permanent problems such as scarring, blindness, deformed arms and legs, or brain damage. Women infected late in their pregnancy may pass chickenpox on to their baby. Babies who are born with chickenpox are usually severely ill and often do not survive the infection.

The varicella vaccine contains weakened forms of the varicella virus. It is approved by Health Canada and is provided at no charge by Manitoba Health as part of Manitoba's routine immunization schedule and to those at high risk.

How is chickenpox spread?

Varicella virus can be spread through the air, so the virus can pass from person to person by coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread through contact with fluid from the chickenpox blisters of an infected person.

Why should my child get the varicella vaccine?

Immunization is the best way to protect your child against chickenpox.

When your child is immunized you also help protect others, because someone who is immunized is less likely to spread infection. This is especially important with varicella. Immunizing your child helps to protect pregnant women and their unborn babies as well as immune-compromised individuals who either cannot be immunized with the varicella vaccine or who may experience serious complications if they come into contact with the varicella virus.

Most people who get the varicella vaccine will not get chickenpox. If someone who has been immunized does get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. They will have fewer blisters, are less likely to have a fever or serious complications, and will recover faster.

Who should get the varicella vaccine?

All children 12 months of age or older should get the varicella vaccine. In Manitoba it is usually given at 12 months of age and at 4-6 years of age.

The doses of varicella vaccine can be given as individual vaccines or, as part of a combined vaccine containing mumps, measles, rubella and varicella (MMRV).

If your child has had chickenpox before their 1st birthday, they should still get the vaccine as they may not have developed a long lasting immunity and could get chickenpox again.

¹ The Public Health Agency of Canada

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Older children and adults may also need to get the varicella vaccine if they have not had chickenpox and have any of the following:

- cystic fibrosis
- a weakened immune system
- nephrotic syndrome
- hemo or peritoneal dialysis
- long-term aspirin therapy

Talk to your doctor or primary health care provider for more information.

Who should NOT get the varicella vaccine?

Pregnant women

Anyone who has had a severe allergic reaction to a previous dose of the varicella vaccine, or to any of the other contents of the vaccine (ex. gelatin, neomycin).

Speak to a health care provider before getting the varicella vaccine if your child has:

- an immune system weakened by disease or medical treatment
- a blood transfusion or received other blood products within the past 12 months
- tuberculosis

Your child should not get immunized if they have a high fever. But they can still get the varicella vaccine if they have a mild illness, like a cold.

Women should avoid pregnancy for one month after they get the varicella vaccine.

Possible side-effects of the varicella vaccine.

Varicella vaccines are known to be very safe. It is much safer for your child to get this vaccine than to get chickenpox.

Common reactions to the vaccine include soreness, redness and swelling where the vaccine was given. Some people will develop a mild rash that looks like chickenpox (blisters on the skin) within a few weeks of receiving the vaccine. This rash usually lasts for about five days. Spread of chickenpox through the fluid in these blisters is possible, but rare.

Other side-effects include fever and in some children fussiness. These are generally mild reactions and usually last one to two days. Acetaminophen (Tylenol® or Tempra®) can be given for fever or soreness.

ASA (Aspirin®) should NEVER be given to children because it can cause a severe liver and brain disease called Reye's Syndrome.

It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine because there is a rare possibility of a severe allergic reaction. This can include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat, tongue or lips. **If this happens after you leave the clinic, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department for immediate treatment.**

Report any serious or unexpected side-effects to a public health nurse or doctor.

For more information on varicella vaccine:

Talk to your doctor or public health nurse.

Call Health Links-Info Santé in Winnipeg at 788-8200; toll-free elsewhere in Manitoba 1-888-315-9257.

Or visit:

Manitoba Public Health website

www.manitoba.ca/health/publichealth/index.html

Canadian Pediatric Society website

www.cps.ca/English/HealthCentres/immunization.htm

Public Health Agency of Canada

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/index-eng.php