

Chickenpox Disease

(Varicella)

INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

What is Chickenpox (Varicella)?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus.

How can I get Chickenpox?

The virus is spread person to person through direct contact with the fluid in the spots or breathing in airborne droplets. For example when someone coughs.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include fever and “cold-like” symptoms, followed by a rash. The rash appears as blisters, which crust to form scabs. Crops of blisters may appear over several days and various stages of blisters may be present during this time. The rash is more noticeable on the trunk than on the limbs and may affect the scalp and the inside of the mouth, nose and throat. The rash is usually itchy.

It is usually a mild disease that lasts for a short time in healthy children; however a small percentage of cases will develop a more severe illness with pneumonia, inflammation of the brain and bacterial skin infections, which can sometimes result in scarring.

Chickenpox can cause serious and even fatal illness in immunosuppressed (those with low immunity) people of any age.

Adults who catch chickenpox often experience more severe symptoms.

If pregnant woman get chickenpox there may be a risk to the unborn baby.

What is the incubation periods? (time between becoming infected and developing symptoms).

The average incubation period for chickenpox is 10 to 21 days.

What is the infectious Period? (time during which an infected person can infect others).

The person is infectious from 48 hours before the onset of the rash and until all spots have crusted.

Who can catch chickenpox?

Anyone who has never had chickenpox before can catch it. Any person with a reliable history of chickenpox disease is considered immune. About 75% of people catch chickenpox before 12 years of age. Some will not have symptoms.

How can we prevent chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) vaccination is the best way of preventing disease.

Currently the chickenpox vaccine is **not free**

The Australian Standard Vaccination Schedule recommends:

A single dose of chickenpox vaccine for:

Children up to the 14th birthday

The vaccine is recommended on the schedule to be given:

- At **18 months** unless they have already had chickenpox or chickenpox vaccine.
- At **10-14 years**, unless they already had chickenpox or had chickenpox vaccine.

If parents wish to vaccinate their non-immune child from **12 months** of age who has not already had chickenpox or received a chickenpox vaccine, a single dose of vaccine is recommended.

What is currently recommended for those over the age of 14 years?

For those 14 years and older a blood test to check for immunity prior to vaccination is recommended. This is because many people who do not have a history of chickenpox are immune. About 75% of people catch chickenpox before they are 12 years old some

may not have any symptoms but develop a satisfactory immunity.

Vaccine is recommended for non-immune adolescents (14 years and older) in the following situations:

- Non-immune household contacts of immunosuppressed (those with low immunity) persons.
- Health-care workers.
- Teachers and workers in Child Care Centre's.
- Non-immune women prior to pregnancy. (A woman should not become pregnant for 1 month after vaccination).
- Non-immune parents of young children.

Those aged 14 years and older require 2 doses of the chickenpox vaccine, 1-2 months apart.

It is important to note that while the chickenpox vaccine is strongly recommended for the groups outlined above, it is **not funded** under the National Immunisation Program and therefore needs to be purchased privately.

There are two brands of chickenpox vaccine currently available: Varilrix® and Varivax®. The chickenpox vaccine contains a small amount of the live virus at a reduced strength and a small amount of the antibiotic, neomycin.

Possible Adverse Events Following Chickenpox Vaccine

Reactions are generally mild and well tolerated.

- Fever over 39° has been reported in 15% of healthy children within 42 days of immunization. In adults and adolescents, fever has been reported in 10% of vaccinees.
- Injection site soreness occurs in 7-30% of vaccinees. In healthy adolescents and adults, a second dose of vaccine appears to cause fewer reactions than the first.

- A rash may develop after vaccination (usually within 5-26 days). Rashes typically consist of 2-5 spots. If a person gets a rash following chickenpox vaccine they should avoid contact with immunosuppressed (those with low immunity) people for the duration of the rash.
- More serious reactions are very rare although it may be possible for anaphylaxis thrombocytopenia, ataxia and encephalitis, to occur as there are rare complications of natural varicella infection.

If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or Hospital for advice.

Where can I get more information?

- Ask your immunization provider
- Phone the Communicable Disease Control Branch 8226 7177
- Visit a website:

<http://immunise.health.gov.au>

<http://www.dhs.sa.gov.au/peh/You've-got-what/specific-conditions/chickenpox.htm>

<http://www.ncirs.usyd.edu.au/facts/facts.html>

<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/phd/immunisation>

<http://www.cdc.gov/nip>

<http://www.nfid.org/ncai/factsheets/>

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Reference:

NHMRC (2003) Australian Immunisation Handbook, 8th Edition

CDCB (1998) "You've got what?" (2nd Edition)