

Varicella infection

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What is Varicella?

Varicella (chicken pox) is a very contagious viral infection caught by close contact with an infected person or from coughing and sneezing.

It is most common in children under the age of 10 years and is usually a mild illness.

In adults the infection can be more serious, especially for pregnant women as there can be a risk to the baby.

Immunosuppressed individuals and new-borns are at particular risk of serious varicella infection.

1-3 weeks following contact with the infection, a person typically develops a fever, tiredness and a blistering rash starting on the face/scalp and eventually spreading to any part of the body.

Who should **NOT** receive the vaccine?

- Those under the age of 1 year
- Those with allergy to any component of the vaccine including gelatine and neomycin
- Those individuals whose immune system is compromised
- Those receiving or recently received in the last 6 months treatments for cancer
- Those on drugs that suppress the immune system e.g. steroids
- People whose immune system is compromised because of HIV infection.
- Those who have received a blood transfusion, any blood products or immunoglobulins, in the last 5 months (according to the vaccine manufacturer)
- Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding
- Those who have a family member with a weakened immune system
- Those who have received MMR can proceed with varicella on the same day OR if not possible must allow a 4-week interval before receiving this vaccine.

Varicella vaccine

Given to those aged 12 months or older

2 doses ideally 4-8 weeks apart

Adverse problems reported following vaccination include:

- Generally feeling unwell, headache, flu-like illness
- Soreness/rash at the site of the injection or rest of the body which may be infectious to others (10% of adults and 5% of children who are vaccinated)
- Very rarely severe reactions are reported including allergic reactions, nervous system problems including meningitis
- The weakened virus of the vaccine can reactivate to cause herpes zoster (shingles) infection although this is not common.

After receiving the vaccine:

It is possible to transmit varicella (chickenpox) virus from the person who has been vaccinated to another person and for this reason, vaccine recipients should attempt to avoid contact with susceptible high-risk individuals for up to 6 weeks following vaccination, including contact with:

- Anyone with weakened immune systems
- Pregnant women who are not immune to varicella infection
- New born babies whose mothers have not had varicella infection

Women of child bearing age should avoid pregnancy for 1 month after receiving the course of 2 vaccines and **are required to complete a consent form prior to receiving the vaccine**

Aspirin/Ibuprofen or any drug containing salicylates should be avoided by the person receiving the vaccine for 6 weeks after vaccination as Reye's syndrome may occur.

How effective is the vaccine?

In children: two doses may provide about 98% protection.

In adolescents and adults: two doses provides about 75% protection.