
Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine Program

Questions and Answers for Parents and Caregivers

This fact sheet provides basic information for parents and caregivers. It is not intended to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you may have before you make any changes to your current diet, lifestyle or treatment.

Immunization is one of the most effective ways to protect yourself and your family against vaccine preventable diseases.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is introducing a second dose of varicella vaccine to the *Publicly Funded Immunization Schedules for Ontario* to protect children against chickenpox infection.

What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Chickenpox is caused by the *varicella-zoster virus*. Children with chickenpox will feel sick with fatigue, mild headache, fever up to 39°C, chills and muscle or joint aches a day or two before the red rash begins. The raised itchy red blisters can be anywhere on the body. Blisters dry up and form scabs in four to five days.

Some children may experience complications or more serious problems from chickenpox such as:

- bacterial skin infections and/or necrotizing fasciitis ("flesh-eating disease");
- pneumonia (infection of the lungs);
- encephalitis (infection of the brain); and
- infection of other sites (e.g., blood).

Birth defects may occur if the baby gets chickenpox from the mother before being born.

The risk of these complications increases with age.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads very easily from person to person. It is passed from an infected person to others through coughing, sneezing and even talking. You can also get chickenpox if you touch a blister or the liquid from a blister then touch your mouth, nose or eyes.

A pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it on to her unborn baby before birth. Mothers with chickenpox can also give it to their newborn baby after birth.

Why is the varicella vaccine important?

Although the one-dose chickenpox vaccine program has decreased hospitalization from chickenpox infection, some children are still at risk of becoming infected after one dose. Giving two doses will further protect children against chickenpox and reduce the total number of cases, as well as complications.

Chickenpox can be very severe or even life threatening to newborn babies, and anyone with a weak immune system.

How well does the varicella vaccine protect against chickenpox?

It is estimated that the varicella vaccine offers 70 to 90 per cent protection against chickenpox of any severity. The second dose of the vaccine is estimated to offer 98 to 99.9 per cent protection against chickenpox.

Most people who get the chickenpox vaccine will not get chickenpox. But if someone who has been vaccinated does get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. They will have fewer blisters, are less likely to have a fever and will recover faster.

The vaccine almost always prevents severe disease. Getting the chickenpox vaccine is much safer than getting chickenpox disease.

Who is eligible to receive the publicly funded vaccine?

Children born on or after January 1, 2000, who are at least 12 months of age, are eligible to receive the publicly funded chickenpox vaccine.

In addition, people with the following medical conditions that put them at increased risk for complications due to chickenpox will also be eligible:

- children and adolescents given chronic salicylic acid therapy;
- people with cystic fibrosis; and
- immunocompromised persons – this should be determined on an individual basis. The varicella vaccine is recommended for some immunocompromised children, but not for others. Please discuss this with your doctor.

At what age should the chickenpox vaccine be given?

Children at 15 months of age will be offered their first vaccine dose as part of the routine childhood immunization program.

The second dose will be offered to children at 4 years of age in the form of the MMRV (measles, mumps, rubella and varicella) vaccine.

If your child has already had two doses of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine and one dose of the chickenpox vaccine and was born on or after January 1, 2000, he /she is still eligible for a second dose of the chickenpox vaccine.

Who should not get the vaccine?

Children should not receive the vaccine if they have:

- allergies to the vaccine or any component of the vaccine;
- known allergies to neomycin or gelatine; or
- had an anaphylactic reaction to a prior dose of the vaccine.

Please consult your health care provider if your child has:

- a weakened immune system or are on medications that suppress the immune system;
- received blood or blood products; or
- a severe infection with a high fever higher than 38°C.

You should always discuss the benefits and risks of any vaccine with your health care provider or local public health unit.

Is the chickenpox vaccine safe?

The chickenpox vaccine is considered a safe vaccine. Most reactions tend to be mild and include some soreness, redness, itching and/or a rash where the needle was given. A low-grade fever (approximately 38°C) may occur.

Severe reactions are rare.

Please report any side effects or severe vaccine reaction to your health care provider or local public health unit.

Do not give aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid, ASA) for pain or fever. The use of aspirin has been associated with an increased risk of Reye's syndrome (a severe disorder of the liver and brain) after vaccination.

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your health care provider or go to the nearest hospital emergency department if your child has any of the following reactions within three days of receiving the vaccine:

- hives;
- swelling of the mouth and throat;
- trouble breathing, hoarseness or wheezing
- high fever (40°C);
- convulsions or seizures; or
- other serious symptoms (e.g., paraesthesia).

Who should I talk to if I have any questions?

For more information see your health care provider or call your local public health unit.

How should my child's immunization be recorded?

After your child receives any immunization, make sure his/her personal immunization record (i.e., the "Yellow Card") is updated. Keep it in a safe place!