

# CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA) VACCINE INFORMATION SHEET

## Main points

- Chickenpox (varicella) is a highly contagious virus;
- It causes a low-grade fever and vesicular rash (fluid-filled spots). Reactivation of the virus later in life causes herpes zoster (shingles).
- One in 100,000 people who get chickenpox develop encephalitis (brain inflammation).
- Infection during pregnancy can result in congenital malformations in the baby.
- Infection in the mother around delivery time results in severe infection in the newborn baby in up to 1/3 of cases.
- About 1 in 5 people who receive the vaccine has a local reaction or fever.
- About 3 to 5 in 100 may develop a mild varicella-like rash.
- Serious adverse events are very rare.

## What is chickenpox (varicella)?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Children with chickenpox can have up to 500 red, itchy blisters. Infection in adolescents, adults and those with weakened immune systems is more severe.

Complications from chickenpox include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain), and bacterial infections of the skin. Encephalitis can lead to convulsions, deafness or brain damage. About 1 in 3,000 adults will die from the infection.

The virus is easily spread through the air by sneezing and coughing. It can also be spread through contact with the fluid from chickenpox blisters.

For some people, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash called shingles.

## Who should get the chickenpox vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine is recommended and funded for adolescents aged 13-14 years. Most adolescents will only need 1 dose of vaccine. However for adolescents who are 14 years old when they get their 1<sup>st</sup> dose, a 2<sup>nd</sup> dose of vaccine is needed at least one month later.

Chickenpox vaccine is also recommended but not funded for older adolescents and adults (especially women who may become pregnant) who have not had chickenpox or the vaccine before.

VaxWorks Health will, wherever possible, use funded vaccines to help protect people at risk of chickenpox infection.

Immunisation against chickenpox is also offered to infants at 18 months of age; however this is offered in a vaccine which is combined with the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine.

## What are the benefits of getting the chickenpox vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine is the best way to protect you or your child against chickenpox and its complications.

About 3 out of 20 people may get chickenpox even after being immunised. This illness will be much milder than if they had not been immunised.

When you get vaccinated, you help protect others as well.

## What are possible reactions after the vaccine?

Vaccines are very safe. It is much safer to get the vaccine than to get chickenpox.

Common reactions to the vaccine may include soreness, redness and swelling where the vaccine was given. A mild fever and a rash, which looks like chickenpox but with fewer spots, can occur about 2 weeks after the vaccine.

Very rarely, an immunised person who develops a rash after vaccination can spread the virus from the chickenpox vaccine to others. To prevent spreading the virus to others the rash should be covered until the blisters have dried and crusted over.

It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine because there is an extremely rare possibility of a life-threatening allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. This may include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat, tongue or lips. If this happens after you leave the clinic, call 000. This reaction can be treated, and it occurs in less than 1 in a million people who get the vaccine.

Always report serious or unexpected reactions to VaxWorks Health on 1300 34 84 22 or to your GP.

## Who should not get the MMR vaccine?

Speak with clinic staff if you or your child:

- has had a life-threatening reaction to a previous dose of chickenpox vaccine, or any component of the vaccine including neomycin or gelatin;
- has had an immune system weakened by disease or medical treatment;
- has had a blood transfusion or received other blood products within the past 12 months;
- have active untreated tuberculosis; or
- is pregnant.

There is no need to delay getting immunised because of a cold or other mild illness. However, if you have concerns, speak with the clinic staff.