

## Chickenpox Vaccine (Varilrix<sup>®</sup> or Varivax<sup>®</sup>)

Vaccines (or needles) are the best way to protect against some very serious infections. The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and the Canadian Paediatric Society recommend routine immunization against chickenpox.

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (or varicella) is an illness caused by a virus. People with chickenpox have a blister-like rash, itching, slight fever and fatigue. Chickenpox is very easy to catch. Before widespread use of the chickenpox vaccine, there were about 350,000 new cases each year in Canada.

Although the one-dose schedule of chickenpox vaccine has reduced disease and hospitalization, some children are still at risk of being infected after one dose. Two doses of chickenpox vaccine further protect against the disease and reduce hospitalizations and complications.

Chickenpox can cause problems such as scarring of the skin, skin or bone infections, and pneumonia. Serious illness, such as inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) can occur, but it is rare. More than 1,800 people are hospitalized for complications of chickenpox every year. It is estimated that one person in 33,000 will die from chickenpox.

If a pregnant woman gets chickenpox, the unborn baby may develop birth defects or serious complications, including death.

In many people, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash called shingles. This may happen years after a person has had chickenpox.

### Are some people more at risk for serious chickenpox illness?

- Anyone who has not had chickenpox and is not vaccinated is at risk.
- Newborn babies and anyone with a weak immune system can have severe life threatening illness.

- Women who get chickenpox during pregnancy can pass the disease to their unborn baby. This could lead to birth defects.
- Teens and adults who get chickenpox are more likely to have complications.
- People from the tropics may not be immune to the illness. Chickenpox is less common in tropical countries.

### Can chickenpox or shingles be treated?

There is no cure for chickenpox or shingles. However, there are medications that can make chickenpox illness less severe in people who are at higher risk. Medications may also shorten illness from shingles.

### How effective is the chickenpox vaccine?

The vaccine protects 70 – 90% of people against infection. Between 85 – 95% of people are protected against more serious chickenpox disease. Most people who get the vaccine do not get chickenpox. If they do, it is usually mild, with a minor rash that does not last long.

### Who should get the chickenpox vaccine?

The vaccine should be given to the following people who have not had chickenpox in the past:

- children over 12 months of age (one dose should be given before 18 months of age)
- teens, adults, and women of child-bearing age
- children and teens on long-term salicylic acid therapy (creams/lotions or aspirin). (The doctor will instruct about continuing medications following the vaccine.)
- those with cystic fibrosis
- household contacts of people who have weak immune systems

If someone who has never had chickenpox comes in contact with the virus, receiving the vaccine within three days of the contact will prevent chickenpox or reduce its severity.

## When should the chickenpox vaccine be given?

- Children who are 12 months to 12 years old get two injections three months apart. The vaccines are publicly funded (free) for this group.
- People who are 13 years of age or older get two injections given four to eight weeks apart.
- The chickenpox vaccine can be safely given at the same time as other childhood or adult vaccines.

## What if my child misses a needle?

Chickenpox vaccine must be given after the first birthday. It can be given on the same day as the vaccine for measles, mumps rubella (MMR). If that is not possible, the vaccines must be given four weeks apart. Your health care provider will discuss a “catch-up” schedule with you.

## Is the chickenpox vaccine safe?

Yes. The chickenpox vaccine is safe. Sometimes people will have soreness, redness, or a bit of swelling where the chickenpox vaccine was given. Sometimes, there may be fever or rash. If fever does occur, **do not** use products that contain salicylates, such as aspirin, ASA, 222's, 292's or willow bark.

Occasionally, people develop a blister-like rash following the vaccine. If this happens, keep the rash covered and contact the Health Department. The rash will go away by itself.

## If I notice something unusual after the vaccine is given, when should I see a doctor?

Serious side effects or allergic reactions can occur with any medication, including vaccines. See your doctor or go to the emergency room right away if any of the following symptoms develop within three days of getting the chickenpox vaccine:

- high fever (over 40<sup>0</sup> C or 104<sup>0</sup> F)
- hives
- swelling of the face or mouth
- trouble breathing
- very pale colour and serious drowsiness
- convulsions or seizures
- other serious problems

## Who should not get the vaccine?

You should not get chickenpox vaccine if:

- you have had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of chickenpox vaccine;
- you have an allergy to any of the components of the vaccine like neomycin or gelatine;
- you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant (women should avoid becoming pregnant for one month after the chickenpox vaccine is given).
- you have an immune system that does not work properly due to a medical condition such as HIV or AIDS, cancer, lymphoma or leukemia, congenital diseases of the immune system, or due to treatment or medication.

People who take steroid medications (except for inhalers, creams, ointments or drops) and medications affecting the immune system should check with their doctor before getting the chickenpox vaccine.

Tell your health care provider if you have received any other injections or transfusions within the last ten months. Also, discuss any allergies, illnesses, or any previous suspected reaction to a vaccine. These may affect how the vaccine works. If you are sick, ask about waiting until you feel better before getting the vaccine.

## Who should I talk to if I have more questions?

If you have more questions, speak to your health care provider or call the Health Department at the number below.

## Your record of protection

Your health care provider will update your personal immunization record or give you a new one. Keep it in a safe place!

For more information, please contact  
**Halton Region**  
Call 311 or 905-825-6000  
Toll Free: 1-866-4HALTON (1-866-442-5866)  
TTY: 905-827-9833  
[www.halton.ca](http://www.halton.ca)

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