

Varicella (Chicken Pox) Vaccine Fact Sheet

The varicella or “chickenpox” vaccine helps to protect children and adults from the chickenpox virus.

What is varicella / chickenpox?

- Chickenpox is a highly contagious infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. This is the same virus that can resurface later in life as “shingles.”
- It occurs most commonly in children but can also affect adolescents and adults.
- Chickenpox usually begins with a fever, headache, aches and pains, followed in a day or two by an itchy rash with red spots that turn into fluid-filled blisters then scab over.
- It is most contagious one or two days before the rash appears, and symptoms occur 2 to 3 weeks after first exposure.
- Chickenpox spreads through coughing and sneezing or from touching the sores / blisters of infected people or any article that has touched the sores, e.g. tissues or clothing.
- Newborns and people whose immunity is suppressed for any reason (e.g. disease, medication or cancer treatment) can become very ill with chickenpox.
- A pregnant woman who is not immune and her unborn baby are at risk for complications if the mother contracts chickenpox during her pregnancy.

Who should get the publicly funded (free) chicken pox vaccine?

- Children should receive two doses of chickenpox vaccine: the first dose at 15 months of age and the second dose at 4-6 years of age. The second dose is usually in the combined MMRV vaccine with measles, mumps, rubella and varicella.
- Adolescents (13 years and older) who have never had chickenpox should get 2 doses of varicella vaccine, at least 3 months apart.

Who should not get the chicken pox vaccine?

- Babies under one year of age.
- Anyone who has had chickenpox after the age of one, who has likely developed immunity
- Anyone who has had a serious allergic reaction to this vaccine in the past, or to any component of the vaccine:
 - **Varivax® III** – live, weakened varicella virus, sucrose, hydrolyzed gelatin, urea, sodium chloride, monosodium L-glutamate, sodium phosphate dibasic, potassium phosphate monobasic, potassium chloride, MRC-5 cells, neomycin and fetal bovine serum.
 - **Varilrix®** - live, weakened varicella-zoster virus, amino acids, human albumin, lactose, neomycin sulphate, and polyalcohols. **May contain latex.**
- Anyone with
 - blood disorders or cancers affecting the bone marrow, blood or lymph system
 - active untreated tuberculosis
 - an impaired immune response / on high dose of medication that lowers the body’s ability to fight infections

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Rev 2019/01/11

Who should not get the chicken pox vaccine? (cont'd)

- Anyone who
 - is pregnant or could be pregnant
 - has received a live vaccine in the last month or varicella vaccine in the previous 3 months
- Anyone with a high fever or moderate to severe illness should wait until they feel well.

What are the common side effects of this vaccine?

- Some people may feel sore and swollen for a few days where the needle was given, and may even develop a chickenpox-like rash at the site, with less than 10 spots / blisters, up to 26 days after immunization.
- If a rash appears, please inform Public Health at 613-966-5500.
- Some people may have general muscle aches, fever and feel tired for a day or two.
- Tylenol® or ibuprofen may be taken afterwards, as directed, to reduce discomfort or fever.
- **Children under 19 years of age must not be given ASA, Aspirin® or salicylates after varicella immunization.**

What else do I need to know?

- It is possible to catch the chickenpox from someone with shingles, but you cannot catch shingles from someone with chickenpox.
- Pregnancy should be avoided for **at least 4 weeks** after having the varicella vaccine.
- It is not advisable to have the varicella vaccine if you are breastfeeding.
- If your child is exposed to chickenpox, they may be protected if vaccinated within 3 days.
- If a family member has chickenpox, do not separate them from the rest of the family as it is impossible to prevent it from spreading in the house.
- The Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014 requires all children entering daycare to provide proof of immunization, according to the Publicly Funded Immunization Schedule for Ontario.
- The Immunization of School Pupils Act requires all students between the ages of 4 to 17 to be immunized according to Ontario's Immunization Schedule, unless a valid Statement of Medical Exemption or Conscience or Religious Belief is on file with public health.

When should I seek medical help after immunization?

- If you or your child experiences any unusual side effects after immunization, seek medical attention and notify us.
- Call 911 or go to Emergency at a hospital right away if you or your child has any of the following after immunization:
 - swelling of the face and neck
 - problems breathing
 - hives and itchy, reddened skin

Your Record of Protection

After you receive any immunization, make sure your health care provider updates your personal immunization record. Keep it in a safe place. Please inform us of any immunizations not received from public health.

Other questions? Talk to your health care provider or call our Immunization Program at 613-966-5500 Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | www.hpepublichealth.ca

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