

Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine

Protects against varicella-zoster virus.

What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is very contagious and spreads easily through contact with fluid in blisters or coughing and sneezing. Children with chickenpox can have hundreds of red, itchy blisters.

Infection in newborns, teenagers, adults, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems is more severe. Complications may include pneumonia (infection of the lungs), encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), skin and blood infections. Encephalitis can lead to seizures, deafness or brain damage. About 1 in 3,000 adults will die from the infection.

Rarely, infection early in pregnancy can result in birth defects in the baby. This is known as congenital varicella syndrome (CVS). Babies may have a low birth weight, scars and problems with their limbs, eyes and brain. Chickenpox can also cause miscarriage or stillbirth and can be passed from infected mother to their newborn after birth.

Why get vaccinated?

Immunization is the best way to protect you and your family against serious diseases. This vaccine is most effective when given before exposure to the disease.

Studies in children show the varicella vaccine is estimated to be 94% effective after one dose and 98% after the second dose.

For some people who get chickenpox disease, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash called shingles. Vaccination lowers the risk of developing shingles.

Chickenpox vaccine is required for children born on or after January 1, 2010, to attend school and child care settings in Ontario. Parents are required to provide a record of immunization or valid exemption before their child attends.

Who is eligible to be vaccinated?

- Infants and young children are routinely immunized at 15 months of age. A second dose is given at 4 to 6 years of age and is combined with measles, mumps, rubella in the MMRV vaccine.
- Anyone who born in or after 2000 who have not had chickenpox disease can receive two doses of publicly-funded chickenpox vaccine given at least six weeks apart.
- Adults born in or prior to 1999 who have never had chickenpox should get two doses of the vaccine, although it is only publicly-funded for persons with certain risk factors, such as:
 - People with cystic fibrosis
 - Household contacts of immunocompromised people
 - People with a weakened immune system due to chronic disease and/or immunosuppressive medication
- Individuals who have never had chickenpox disease or received vaccine and have been exposed to a case of chickenpox may benefit from a dose of vaccine when given within 3-5 days of contact. Vaccination has been shown to reduce severity of the disease.

Who should not get the vaccine?

- Anyone with a severe allergic reaction to any part of the vaccine or its container.
- Anyone who has had a serious allergic reaction to this vaccine in the past.
- Anyone with a high fever or serious infection worse than a cold.
- Anyone who is pregnant or trying to become pregnant. Women should not get pregnant for one month after receiving chickenpox vaccine.
- Anyone with a severely weakened immune system, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), cancer or taking medications that weaken the immune system.
- Individuals with active or untreated tuberculosis.
- Infants under 1 year of age

Your health care provider may delay giving this vaccine if you have received any blood product (i.e. blood transfusion or immune globulin) within the last year or received a live vaccine (i.e. MMR, MMRV) in the last six weeks.

The effectiveness of this vaccine may be reduced if you are taking an antiviral therapy. Speak to your health care provider about your medications and receiving this vaccine.

TB skin testing should be completed on the same day as chickenpox vaccination or separated by 4 weeks.

What to expect after vaccination?

Chickenpox vaccine is safe and well tolerated. Side effects, if they occur, are usually mild and go away in a few days. Common side effects include redness, swelling and/or pain at the injection site.

Headache, fever, tiredness, dizziness, nausea and muscle aches may also occur, but are less common.

A chickenpox-like rash may occur 5 to 26 days after the vaccine was given. Very rarely, a person who develops a chickenpox-like rash after being vaccinated can spread virus from the vaccine. To prevent spreading it to others, cover the rash until blisters have

dried or crusted over. It is also important to avoid persons who may be at high risk for severe disease, including newborns, pregnant women, and individuals who may be immunocompromised.

Severe allergic reactions (i.e. anaphylaxis), although rare, are a risk with the administration of any vaccine. It is recommended that you remain in a clinic setting for 15 minutes following immunization as this is the most common timeframe when anaphylaxis will occur.

Stay up to date with your vaccinations

Make sure your healthcare provider updates your personal immunization record (yellow card) after you receive a vaccine. Keep your records in a safe place.

If your child attends licensed child care or school, please notify Public Health when a vaccine is given. You can report the vaccines in one of the following ways:

- **Online:** The Immunization Connect Ontario (ICON) tool available at immunizewdg.ca allows you to report and view your child's immunization record.
- **Email:** vaccine.records@wdgpublichealth.ca
- **Phone:** 1-800-265-7293 ext. 4396
- **Fax:** 1-519-836-2986

For more information visit:

- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health: wdgpublichealth.ca
- Ontario Ministry of Health: www.ontario.ca/page/vaccines
- Immunize Canada: www.immunize.ca
- Publicly Funded Immunization Schedules for Ontario: www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/immunization/schedule.aspx