



Varicella Vaccination

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What is varicella?

Varicella, or “chickenpox”, is a common childhood viral infection characterised by a generalised, itchy, rash of 250-500 vesicles (tiny blisters) that typically starts on the trunk and face and spreads to the limbs. About 5% of varicella cases do not develop a rash.

How common is varicella?

In Australia, there are about 240,000 cases, 1,500 hospitalisations and 7 deaths each year from varicella. It is more severe in adults and can cause serious and even fatal illnesses in immunosuppressed people (including pregnant women). About 75% of children 12 years of age, 95% of pregnant women, and 98% of people 30 years of age or older have had varicella. People who have had varicella are usually immune to it for life, although they will be susceptible to zoster (see below).

What is zoster?

Zoster, or “shingles”, is a painful, blistering rash of the cutaneous (skin) sensory nerves. It is caused by the eruption of the same virus that previously gave the patient varicella. The varicella virus remains in the sensory nerve cells near the spinal cord for life. Zoster affects mostly adults (80% of cases are 40 years of age or older) and is more severe in immunosuppressed people. In Australia, there are about 10 deaths each year from zoster, with 9 of these deaths occurring in people 65 years of age or older.

Why should my child be vaccinated against varicella?

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that all children should routinely be vaccinated against varicella at 18 months or at 11-13 years of age, unless they have previously had varicella or have been vaccinated against varicella. Children can be vaccinated against varicella from 12 months of age. The varicella vaccines (**Varilrix™**, **Varivax Refrigerated™**) provide good protection and one dose of either of these vaccines between 12 months and 13 years of age usually gives long term immunity against varicella and, thereby, zoster. People 14 years of age or older require two doses of varicella vaccine given at least 2 months apart.

Where can I get my child vaccinated against varicella?

At your GP. Varicella vaccine is not free and must be prescribed by a doctor.

Who should not be vaccinated against varicella?

People who have had a severe allergic reaction to any of the vaccine components (e.g. neomycin) or to a previous dose of that vaccine, pregnant women, and immunosuppressed persons (e.g. AIDS, high-dose corticosteroid treatment).

What are the side effects from varicella vaccination?

Serious side effects following varicella vaccination (e.g. allergic reactions) are rare. Common (15%), temporary side effects include soreness at the injection site, fever, and rash.

What is the treatment for the side effects from vaccinations?

Paracetamol is recommended to reduce fever and pain (**DO NOT OVERDOSE**). Extra fluids (e.g. breast milk or water) and cooling (e.g. by fan, tepid sponging or bathing) are recommended to reduce fever. If any reaction is severe or if you are worried about any symptoms, immediately contact your doctor, community nurse, or local hospital.

Where can I get more information about varicella vaccination?

Ask your GP, local Population Health Unit, community nurse, health worker, the Central Immunisation Clinic (Phone: 93211312), or use the Internet, e.g. The Australian Immunisation Handbook, 8th edition, 2003: www1.health.gov.au/immhandbook, www.cdc.gov/nip, www.immunisation.nhs.uk.