

Chickenpox and Immunisation

Description:

Varicella or chickenpox is a highly contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. The disease starts with cold-like symptoms such as a mild fever, followed by a rash that turns into red spots and blisters. It is spread through coughing, sneezing and direct contact with chickenpox blisters. While chickenpox is usually a mild disease in healthy children, life-threatening complications such as pneumonia or inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) are possible. It can be fatal in about three in 100,000 cases. If a pregnant woman has chickenpox, there is also a small chance of damage to the unborn baby. Chickenpox can also cause shingles (herpes zoster) in later life.

Practical Advice Immunisation

Immunisation against chickenpox is recommended as part of the National Immunisation Program Schedule and the single dose vaccine is available free for:

- all children aged 18 months; and
- Year 8 students who have not had chickenpox or have not been vaccinated.

If your child is in Year 8 at school in Queensland, they can be immunised at their school through the **School Based Vaccination Program**.

If your child has already had chickenpox, they are immune to the disease and do not need to be vaccinated. If there is any uncertainty whether a person has had chickenpox, it is still quite safe for them to have the vaccine.

Chickenpox immunisation is also recommended (but not funded) for non-immune adolescents over 14 years of age and adults. Immune responses are reduced in adolescents and adults compared with young children. Therefore, adolescents and adults must receive 2 doses of vaccine to achieve adequate protection from chickenpox. The 2 doses should be administered at least 4 weeks apart. Vaccination is particularly important for those non-immune people in the following categories:

- High-risk occupations where exposure to chickenpox is likely (such as healthcare workers, teachers and staff in childcare services).
- Women before pregnancy to avoid complications from chickenpox.
- Women immediately after delivery of a baby.
- Parents of young children.
- Household contacts of people with lowered immunity.

Chickenpox vaccine should not be given during pregnancy nor should the recipient become pregnant for 28 days after vaccination.

Possible side effects of the vaccine

Like all medications, vaccines may have side effects. Most side effects are minor, last a short time and do not lead to any long-term problems.

There may be some swelling, redness and soreness where the injection was given and fever. A mild chickenpox-like rash may develop at the injection site or on the body. If this occurs, the rash usually appears about eight days after vaccination (but can appear any time between five to 26 days). People with this rash should avoid contact with people with weakened immune systems. More serious side effects are extremely rare.

Contact your immunisation provider if you or your child has a reaction following vaccination which you

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consider serious or unexpected.

Pre-vaccination checklist

Please tell your doctor/nurse if the person about to be vaccinated:

- is unwell today
- has a disease which lowers immunity (eg. leukaemia, cancer, HIV/AIDS) or is having treatment which lowers immunity (eg. oral steroid medicines such as cortisone and prednisone, radiotherapy, chemotherapy)
- has had a severe reaction following any vaccine
- has any severe allergies (to anything)
- has had any vaccine in the past month
- has had an injection of immunoglobulin, or received any blood products or a whole blood transfusion within the past year
- is pregnant
- has a past history of Guillain-Barre syndrome
- was a preterm infant
- has a chronic illness
- has a bleeding disorder.

A different vaccine schedule may be recommended if the person to be vaccinated:

- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- does not have a functioning spleen
- is planning a pregnancy or anticipating parenthood
- is a parent, grandparent or carer of a newborn
- lives with someone who has a disease which lowers immunity (eg. leukaemia, cancer, HIV/AIDS), or lives with someone who is having treatment which lowers immunity (eg. oral steroid medicines such as cortisone and prednisone, radiotherapy, chemotherapy).

Care after vaccination

- For redness or swelling at the injection site, apply a cold compress.
- To lower temperature or relieve discomfort, paracetamol may be given.
- If fever persists, consult your doctor.
- If any reaction occurs that you consider serious or unexpected, seek medical advice.
- Contact the service provider if you or your child has a reaction following vaccination.

Where can I be immunised?

You can be immunised at your local doctor or medical centre. Some councils, community child health and community health centres hold free immunisation clinics. Check with them for details.

Other Resources

For further information please contact:

- your doctor
- your nearest population health unit
- 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84)
- Immunise Australia National Infoline: 1800 671 811.

Immunise Australia

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A website about childhood immunisation produced by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing.

[Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing](#)

Information about communicable diseases including vaccine preventable diseases.

[Australian Childhood Immunisation Register \(ACIR\)](#) A website about the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR), produced by Medicare Australia.

Heymann, D., ed. 2004. Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 18th edition. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

Related Content

[Chickenpox \(varicella\) factsheet](#)

[School Based Vaccination Program website](#)

[National Health and Medical Research Council, 2008. The Australian Immunisation Handbook \(9th Ed\)](#)