

# 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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### 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.
- 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.
- Go to Emergency at a hospital right away or call 911 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](http://www.hpepublichealth.ca)

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