

# Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine: What You Need to Know

Many Vaccine Information Statements are available in Spanish and other languages. See [www.immunize.org/vis](http://www.immunize.org/vis)

Hojas de información sobre vacunas están disponibles en español y en muchos otros idiomas. Visite [www.immunize.org/vis](http://www.immunize.org/vis)

## 1 Why get vaccinated?

**Varicella** (also called chickenpox) is a very contagious viral disease. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus. Chickenpox is usually mild, but it can be serious in infants under 12 months of age, adolescents, adults, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems.

**Chickenpox** causes an itchy rash that usually lasts about a week. It can also cause:

- fever
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- headache

More serious complications can include:

- skin infections
- infection of the lungs (pneumonia)
- inflammation of blood vessels
- swelling of the brain and/or spinal cord coverings (encephalitis or meningitis)
- blood stream, bone, or joint infections

Some people get so sick that they need to be hospitalized. It doesn't happen often, but people can die from chickenpox. Before varicella vaccine, almost everyone in the United States got chickenpox, an average of 4 million people each year.

Children who get chickenpox usually miss at least 5 or 6 days of school or childcare.

Some people who get chickenpox get a painful rash called shingles (also known as herpes zoster) years later.

Chickenpox can spread easily from an infected person to anyone who has not had chickenpox and has not gotten chickenpox vaccine.

## 2 Chickenpox vaccine

Children 12 months through 12 years of age should get 2 doses of chickenpox vaccine, usually:

- First dose: 12 through 15 months of age
- Second dose: 4 through 6 years of age

People 13 years of age or older who didn't get the vaccine when they were younger, and have never had chickenpox, should get 2 doses at least 28 days apart.

A person who previously received only one dose of chickenpox vaccine should receive a second dose to complete the series. The second dose should be given at least 3 months after the first dose for those younger than 13 years,

and at least 28 days after the first dose for those 13 years of age or older.

There are no known risks to getting chickenpox vaccine at the same time as other vaccines.

There is a combination vaccine called **MMRV** that contains both chickenpox and MMR vaccines. MMRV is an option for some children 12 months through 12 years of age. There is a separate Vaccine Information Statement for MMRV. Your health care provider can give you more information.

## 3 Some people should not get this vaccine

Tell your vaccine provider if the person getting the vaccine:

- **Has any severe, life-threatening allergies.** A person who has ever had a life-threatening allergic reaction after a dose of chickenpox vaccine, or has a severe allergy to any part of this vaccine, may be advised not to be vaccinated. Ask your health care provider if you want information about vaccine components.
- **Is pregnant, or thinks she might be pregnant.** Pregnant women should wait to get chickenpox vaccine until after they are no longer pregnant. Women should avoid getting pregnant for at least 1 month after getting chickenpox vaccine.
- **Has a weakened immune system** due to disease (such as cancer or HIV/AIDS) or medical treatments (such as radiation, immunotherapy, steroids, or chemotherapy).
- **Has a parent, brother, or sister with a history of immune system problems.**
- **Is taking salicylates (such as aspirin).** People should avoid using salicylates for 6 weeks after getting varicella vaccine.
- **Has recently had a blood transfusion or received other blood products.** You might be advised to postpone chickenpox vaccination for 3 months or more.
- **Has tuberculosis.**



- **Has gotten any other vaccines in the past 4 weeks.** Live vaccines given too close together might not work as well.
- **Is not feeling well.** A mild illness, such as a cold, is usually not a reason to postpone a vaccination. Someone who is moderately or severely ill should probably wait. Your doctor can advise you.

## 4 Risks of a vaccine reaction

With any medicine, including vaccines, there is a chance of reactions. These are usually mild and go away on their own, but serious reactions are also possible.

Getting chickenpox vaccine is much safer than getting chickenpox disease. Most people who get chickenpox vaccine do not have any problems with it.

After chickenpox vaccination, a person might experience:

### Minor events:

- Sore arm from the injection
- Fever
- Redness or rash at the injection site

If these events happen, they usually begin within 2 weeks after the shot. They occur less often after the second dose.

**More serious events** following chickenpox vaccination are rare. They can include:

- Seizure (jerking or staring) often associated with fever
- Infection of the lungs (pneumonia) or the brain and spinal cord coverings (meningitis)
- Rash all over the body

A person who develops a rash after chickenpox vaccination might be able to spread the varicella vaccine virus to an unprotected person. Even though this happens very rarely, anyone who gets a rash should stay away from people with weakened immune systems and unvaccinated infants until the rash goes away. Talk with your health care provider to learn more.

### Other things that could happen after this vaccine:

- People sometimes faint after medical procedures, including vaccination. Sitting or lying down for about 15 minutes can help prevent fainting and injuries caused by a fall. Tell your doctor if you feel dizzy or have vision changes or ringing in the ears.
- Some people get shoulder pain that can be more severe and longer-lasting than routine soreness that can follow injections. This happens very rarely.
- Any medication can cause a severe allergic reaction. Such reactions to a vaccine are estimated at about 1 in a million doses, and would happen within a few minutes to a few hours after the vaccination.

As with any medicine, there is a very remote chance of a vaccine causing a serious injury or death.

The safety of vaccines is always being monitored. For more information, visit: [www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/)

## 5 What if there is a serious problem?

### What should I look for?

- Look for anything that concerns you, such as signs of a severe allergic reaction, very high fever, or unusual behavior.

Signs of a **severe allergic reaction** can include hives, swelling of the face and throat, difficulty breathing, a fast heartbeat, dizziness, and weakness. These would usually start a few minutes to a few hours after the vaccination.

### What should I do?

- If you think it is a **severe allergic reaction** or other emergency that can't wait, call 9-1-1 and get to the nearest hospital. Otherwise, call your health care provider.

Afterward, the reaction should be reported to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS). Your doctor should file this report, or you can do it yourself through the VAERS web site at [www.vaers.hhs.gov](http://www.vaers.hhs.gov), or by calling 1-800-822-7967.

*VAERS does not give medical advice.*

## 6 The National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program

The National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP) is a federal program that was created to compensate people who may have been injured by certain vaccines.

Persons who believe they may have been injured by a vaccine can learn about the program and about filing a claim by calling 1-800-338-2382 or visiting the VICP website at [www.hrsa.gov/vaccinecompensation](http://www.hrsa.gov/vaccinecompensation). There is a time limit to file a claim for compensation.

## 7 How can I learn more?

- Ask your health care provider. He or she can give you the vaccine package insert or suggest other sources of information.
- Call your local or state health department.
- Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
  - Call 1-800-232-4636 (1-800-CDC-INFO) or
  - Visit CDC's website at [www.cdc.gov/vaccines](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines)

## Vaccine Information Statement Varicella Vaccine

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