



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 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.

Who should 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 10-13 years of age, unless they have previously had varicella (or zoster). Adults who have not had varicella (or zoster) should also be vaccinated against varicella.

What is the varicella vaccination schedule?

Children can be vaccinated against varicella from 9 months of age, but the immune response (and protection) is significantly better at the scheduled age of 18 months. One dose of varicella vaccine is recommended for people between 12 months and 13 years of age and two doses of varicella vaccine (given at least 1 month apart) is recommended for people 14 years of age or older. Children vaccinated before 12 months of age should have a second dose of varicella vaccine after 12 months of age and at least one month after the first dose.

Where can my child or I get vaccinated against varicella?

At your GP or local immunisation clinic. Varicella vaccine (**Varilrix®**) is funded (free) from 1 November 2005 for children born since 1 May 2004 (i.e. turning 18 months of age), and for children in Year 7 primary school in 2006 (who haven't already had varicella). Varicella vaccine is not free for other persons and must be purchased from a doctor or pharmacist (a doctor's prescription is required).

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. persons with AIDS, high-dose corticosteroid therapy) should not be vaccinated against varicella.

What are the side effects from varicella vaccination?

Common (>10%), temporary side effects include soreness at the injection site, fever, and rash. Serious side effects (e.g. allergic reaction) are rare (<0.0001%).

What is the treatment for the side effects from vaccinations?

Paracetamol is recommended to reduce fever and pain (do not exceed the recommended dosage on the packet). Extra fluids (e.g. breast milk or water) and cooling (e.g. by fan) 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: 9321 1312), or use the Internet, e.g. The Australian Immunisation Handbook, 8th edition, 2003: www1.health.gov.au/immhandbook, the Australian Government: immunise.health.gov.au/index.htm, the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance: www.ncirs.usyd.edu.au