

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Information for the Public on Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a virus that causes an itchy blister-like rash, mild fever and other symptoms. Most children recover fully in about a week.

How is chickenpox transmitted?

The virus can be spread from one person to another through the air or by touching the fluid from chickenpox blisters. A child with chickenpox is contagious from one to two days before the rash appears until the rash crusts over. It takes from 10-21 days after exposure for someone to develop chickenpox.

If my child has been exposed to chickenpox, do I need to be concerned?

If your child has had chickenpox, he/she is immune. If your child has had the vaccine, he/she is protected against serious disease.

If you or your child have not had chickenpox or chickenpox vaccine, here=s what you need to know:

- § Most children and adults recover from chickenpox in about a week. Rarely, children or adults may suffer an infection or other serious complications. Teenagers and adults are more likely to suffer complications.
- § Chickenpox vaccine is effective in preventing or reducing severity of disease if given within 72 hours of exposure. The vaccine *may* be effective if given within 5 days of exposure.
- § Immunocompromised persons and pregnant women who are not immune should see a physician immediately if exposed to chickenpox. A special medication can prevent infection if given within 96 hours of exposure.

Who needs the vaccine?

All children and adults without evidence of immunity to chickenpox need the vaccine. Evidence of immunity includes any of the following:

- Documentation of two doses of chickenpox vaccine
- Blood tests that show you are immune to chickenpox or laboratory confirmation of prior disease
- Born in the United States before 1980 (excluding health-care workers, pregnant women, and immunocompromised persons- these individuals need to meet one of the other criteria for evidence of immunity).
- Receipt from a healthcare provider of a) a diagnosis of chickenpox or b) verification of a history of chickenpox
- Receipt from a healthcare provider of a) a diagnosis of herpes zoster (shingles), or b) verification of a history of herpes zoster (shingles).

You do NOT need the chickenpox vaccine, if you meet any of the above criteria for evidence of immunity.

Key Messages:

- Protection from chickenpox vaccine wanes over time.
- Waning immunity may result in increased susceptibility to chickenpox later in life, when the risk of severe complications are greater than in childhood.
- A second dose of chickenpox vaccine could provide increased protection against disease.

What is the vaccine recommendation?

Two doses of chickenpox vaccine are recommended.

For children, the first dose is recommended at 12-15 months of age. The second dose is recommended at 4-6 years, before entering kindergarten or first grade. It may be given sooner, as long as it is at least 3 months from when the first dose was given.

*Older children, adolescents and adults who have only received one dose of vaccine and have no evidence of past disease, should receive a second dose unless there is a medical contraindication. The second dose should be administered 4-8 weeks after the first dose.

- Special considerations should be given to those who:
 1. have close contact with persons at high risk for severe disease, i.e. immunocompromised, or
 2. are at high risk for exposure or transmission (e.g. teachers, childcare employees, etc.)
- Pregnant women: Women who do not have evidence of immunity should receive the first dose of chickenpox vaccine upon completion of pregnancy and before discharge from the facility. Administer the second dose 4-8 weeks after the first dose.

*For details, see <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm5641-Immunization.pdf>

The following individuals should consider getting the vaccine, if they are not already immune:

- § Persons who live or work in places where exposure to chickenpox is likely, e.g., teachers of young children, day-care employees, etc.
- § Persons who live or work in crowded environments such as college students, inmates and staff of correctional institutions, and military personnel.
- § Non-pregnant women of childbearing age.
- § Adults and adolescents living in households with children.
- § International travelers.

Who should *not* receive the chickenpox vaccine?

Persons who:

- § Ever had a serious allergic reaction to the chickenpox vaccine, neomycin or gelatin.
- § Now have moderate or serious illness;
- § Are pregnant;
- § Are unable to fight serious infections because of:
 - § cancer or cancer treatment with X-rays or drugs (note, if your child has leukemia in remission, he/she may be eligible to receive the vaccine B ask your doctor);
 - § a disease that suppresses the immune system (note, if your child has HIV but normal immune function he/she may receive the vaccine B ask your doctor);
 - § treatment with drugs like long-term steroids; or
 - § recent transfusion with blood or certain blood products.

Remember: persons who are pregnant or immunocompromised can receive a special medication to prevent chickenpox if given within 96 hours of exposure.