

## Chickenpox (varicella) vaccine

Immunization has saved more lives in Canada in the last 50 years than any other health measure.

### What is the chickenpox vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine protects against the varicella-zoster virus, the virus that causes chickenpox. The vaccine contains a weakened form of the virus. The vaccine is approved by Health Canada.

The chickenpox vaccine is free as part of your child's routine immunizations. Call your health care provider to make an appointment.

### Who should get the vaccine?

Children get the chickenpox vaccine as a series of 2 doses. The first dose is given at 12 months of age and the second dose is given at 4 to 6 years of age. For children who also need protection against measles, mumps or rubella, the second dose can be given as the combined measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) vaccine. For more information on the MMRV vaccine, visit [HealthLinkBC File #14e Measles, mumps, rubella and varicella \(MMRV\) vaccine](#).

Children get the vaccine at the same time as other childhood immunizations.

Chickenpox vaccine	Child's age at immunization
1st dose	12 months
2nd dose	4 to 6 years

The vaccine is also available for free to older children and adults who have not been immunized.

People who had chickenpox before their first birthday should still get the vaccine as they may not have developed long-lasting immunity and could get chickenpox again. People who had

chickenpox or shingles at one year of age or older do not need to get the vaccine if:

- They had the disease before 2004
- The disease was confirmed by a lab test

It is important to keep a record of all immunizations received.

### What are the benefits of the vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine is the best way to protect against chickenpox and its complications.

When you get your child immunized, you help protect others as well.

### What are the possible reactions after the vaccine?

Vaccines are very safe. It is much safer to get the vaccine than to get chickenpox.

Common reactions to the vaccine may include soreness, redness and swelling where the vaccine was given. A mild fever and a rash, which looks like chickenpox but with fewer spots, can occur about 2 weeks after the vaccine.

Very rarely, a person who develops a rash after being immunized can spread the virus from the chickenpox vaccine. To prevent spreading it to others, cover the rash until the blisters have dried and crusted over.

Acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (e.g. Advil®) can be given for fever or soreness. ASA (e.g. Aspirin®) should not be given to anyone under 18 years of age due to the risk of Reye syndrome.

\*Ibuprofen should not be given to children under 6 months of age without first speaking to your health care provider.

For more information on Reye syndrome, visit [HealthLinkBC File #84 Reye syndrome](#).

It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine. There is an extremely rare possibility of a life-threatening allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. This happens in less than one in a million people who get the vaccine. Symptoms may include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat, tongue or lips. If this reaction occurs, your health care provider is prepared to treat it. Emergency treatment includes administration of epinephrine (adrenaline) and transfer by ambulance to the nearest emergency department. If symptoms develop after you leave the clinic, call **9-1-1** or the local emergency number.

Always report serious or unexpected reactions to your health care provider.

### Who should not get the vaccine?

Speak with a health care provider if you or your child:

- Had a life-threatening reaction to a previous dose of chickenpox vaccine, or any part of the vaccine including neomycin or gelatin
- Have an immune system weakened by disease or medical treatment
- Had a blood transfusion or received other blood products within the past 12 months
- Have active untreated tuberculosis
- Are pregnant or planning to become pregnant. Pregnancy should be avoided for one month after getting the chickenpox vaccine

There is no need to delay getting immunized because of a cold or other mild illness. However, if you have concerns, speak with your health care provider.

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It spreads easily through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You can become infected when you breathe in this air or touch contaminated

surfaces. The virus may spread through contact with an infected person's saliva by sharing food, drinks, cigarettes or kissing. It also spreads through contact with the fluid from chickenpox or shingles blisters.

Children with chickenpox can have on average 350 red, itchy blisters. Infection in newborns, teenagers, adults, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems is more severe.

Complications from chickenpox include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain) and bacterial infections of the skin. Encephalitis can lead to seizures, deafness or brain damage. About one in 3,000 adults will die from the infection.

Rarely, infection early in pregnancy can result in a baby being born with birth defects. This is known as congenital varicella syndrome. Babies may have a low birth weight, scars and problems with their limbs, eyes and brain. Chickenpox can also cause miscarriage or stillbirth.

For some people, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash called shingles. For more information on chickenpox, visit [HealthLinkBC File #44a Facts about chickenpox](#). For more information on shingles, visit [HealthLinkBC File #111 Shingles vaccine](#).

### Mature minor consent

It is recommended that parents or guardians and their children discuss consent for immunization. Children under the age of 19, who are able to understand the benefits and possible reactions for each vaccine and the risk of not getting immunized, can legally consent to or refuse immunizations. For more information on mature minor consent, visit [HealthLinkBC File #119 The Infants Act, mature minor consent and immunization](#).



BC Centre for Disease Control  
Provincial Health Services Authority

---

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-files](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-files) or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C., visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.