



Frequently Asked Questions about

The Varicella (Chicken Pox) Vaccine

Why do we need to prevent a disease as mild as chickenpox?

- Varicella (chickenpox) is a highly contagious disease that can develop into serious illness in some children. Most children recover within one week, but some children and adults develop serious complications.
- The most common serious complications, which often result in hospitalization, are skin infections and pneumonia.
- Before the varicella vaccine was available, chickenpox caused 11,000 hospitalizations and 100 deaths each year in the United States.¹

Even when children have mild or moderate case of chicken pox, they are uncomfortable and need to be kept out of daycare or school and away from other children until they are no longer contagious. That can take up to 10 days or longer.

Is the varicella vaccine required?

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) each recommend that all children in day care and elementary school receive this vaccine. A number of states have passed laws requiring varicella vaccination before a child can enter school or day care. Current information on state immunization requirements can be found at www.immunizationinfo.org.

Who should receive the varicella vaccine?

- The CDC, AAP and AAFP recommend that children be immunized on or after their first birthday if they have not had chickenpox. Children who are 13 years and older who have not had chickenpox should be given 2 doses of the vaccine (separated by 4 to 8 weeks) to get full protection.

Should I wait until the vaccine has been used for a longer period of time before I let the doctor give it to my child?

- The varicella vaccine is safe and effective. Since the first tests of the vaccine in children in 1975, millions of children have received the vaccine.

Frequently Asked Questions about
The Varicella Vaccine (continued)

Will my child still be protected against chickenpox as an adult if he or she gets the vaccine now?

- The final answer to this question is not known for certain, but currently it appears that the answer is yes.
- In Japan, where human studies with the varicella vaccine began in 1975, adults who received the vaccine as children were still protected against developing chickenpox 20 years later.²

Can the varicella vaccine cause chickenpox? Can other children or adults get chickenpox from being exposed to a child who has recently received the vaccine?

- The varicella vaccine may cause chicken pox since it is a live, weakened virus. About 1% of recipients per year develop a chickenpox rash, which is much milder than the naturally occurring chickenpox, and is usually without fever.
- The few children who develop a rash after receiving the chickenpox vaccine may be contagious for a short period of time. Should this occur, they will spread the weakened vaccine virus, not the wild virus.

Can the varicella vaccine cause shingles?

- Yes, but this happens much less frequently among people who have been immunized than among the vast majority of the population who were naturally infected with chickenpox.
- Shingles is a rash with painful blisters that occurs in some people who previously had chickenpox. This happens because, after a person is exposed to the varicella virus, the virus can continue to live silently for many years in their nerve cells. Later in life, the virus can become reactivated, moving from nerve cells to the skin, causing the painful condition as the virus multiplies.
- Shingles is less common among people exposed to varicella virus through the vaccine. About 0.2% of the people who had chickenpox earlier in life (20 cases per 10,000 people who had chickenpox) will develop shingles each year.¹ Only 0.003% of people (.03 cases per 10,000 doses, or 3 cases per million doses) who have been given the varicella vaccine have developed shingles.¹
- When it develops, shingles in vaccine recipients is much milder than in people who had chickenpox.

Sources

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prevention of varicella: updated recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). *MMWR Morbid Mortal Wkly Rep* 1999;48:1-5.

² Asano Y. Varicella vaccine: the Japanese experience. *J Infect Dis* 1996;174 Suppl 3:S310-313.