

Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine

Vaccines have saved more lives in Canada in the last 60 years than any other medical intervention. Vaccines help your immune system to recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause diseases.

Varicella (chickenpox) is a vaccine preventable disease.

Varicella spreads easily from person to person through the air by sneezing and coughing or by direct contact with the fluid in chickenpox blisters.

- **Fact:** Most children in Saskatchewan **no longer** get chickenpox because of the success of the childhood varicella immunization program.

What are the symptoms of varicella?

Varicella begins with a high fever followed by a red, itchy rash starting on the scalp and moving to the trunk. The rash begins as red spots that become fluid-filled blisters. The blisters gradually crust over. The rash lasts 3 to 4 days, but new crops of blisters can develop every 2 to 3 days during the illness. Children may have 350 or more red, itchy blisters. In teenagers, adults and those with weakened immune systems varicella is more severe.

What are complications from having varicella?

Pneumonia (lung infection), bacterial skin, soft tissue and bone infections, necrotizing fasciitis ('flesh-eating disease'), stroke and encephalitis (swelling of the brain causing convulsions, deafness or brain damage). About 1 in 5,000 adults and 7 in 100,000 infants can die. If a pregnant woman gets varicella, the baby may have a low birth weight, eye problems, skin scarring, arm and leg complications, abnormal brain development, or die if the mother is infected during the baby's birth. The virus can reawaken later in life and cause a painful rash called shingles. Individuals who have never had chickenpox can get infected if they are exposed to someone who has shingles.

How can varicella be prevented?

- Be immunized. When you and your child are immunized, you help protect others as well.
- Practice good hygiene (e.g., handwashing).

Who can get this vaccine for free?

- Children at 12 and 18 months of age (usually combined with measles, mumps and rubella vaccine).
- Non-immune people born since January 1, 1993 (check with Public Health for details).

- Select employed non-immune healthcare employees and post-secondary healthcare students.
- Non-immune women of childbearing age, before they are pregnant or after they have a baby.
- Some non-immune adults and children who have weak immune systems from a disease or medical therapy have a greater risk of developing complications from chickenpox. Check with your medical specialist for detailed information if you can get this vaccine.
- **NOTE: A history of having chickenpox is not acceptable as evidence of immunity for people born since January 1, 2003. Unless you have documented proof of immunity from a blood test to show Public Health, the vaccine is recommended.** There is no harm in immunizing a person who may be immune but not know it.

Who should not get this vaccine?

- Persons who have a serious illness, with or without a fever, should delay immunization.
- People who had a life-threatening reaction to a previous dose of varicella-containing vaccine, or any components of the vaccine.
- People younger than 18 years old who take salicylates (ASA).
- Children younger than 1 year old.
- Pregnant women.
- Those with weakened immune systems from a disease or medical therapy unless they have a doctor's permission.
- People with active untreated tuberculosis.
- People who have received a blood transfusion or other blood products within the past 11 months.
- People who have recently taken some antiviral drugs.

Other Considerations:

- If you need another live vaccine, get it at the same time or wait at least 4 weeks.
- If you need TB skin testing, the vaccine should be given on the same day or you should wait for 4 weeks before immunizing.
- Do not let your child attend 'chickenpox parties'.

What are common reactions to this vaccine?

- **Vaccines are very safe and effective. It is much safer to get the vaccine than to get this disease.**
- Temporary soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site.
- A high fever lasting 1 to 2 days may occur 7 to 10 days after getting this vaccine.
- A varicella-like (blister) rash up to 3 weeks (rarely up to 6 weeks) after getting immunized. People who have this rash rarely spread the vaccine virus to others. To prevent possible viral spreading, the rash should be covered until the blisters have dried and crusted over. **The risk of spreading the varicella virus is much greater if a person becomes infected with wild-type varicella, and this can cause serious threats to contacts including:**
 - People with weakened immune systems who cannot receive this vaccine.
 - Newborn infants of mothers who do not have a known history of chickenpox or laboratory evidence of prior disease.
 - Pregnant women who have never had chickenpox (some have immunity because they have been exposed to varicella, but did not have any disease symptoms).
- Only treat a fever (at least 6 to 8 hours after immunization) **if** your child is uncomfortable, refusing fluids and not sleeping.

It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine because there is an extremely rare possibility of a life-threatening allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. This may include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat, tongue or lips. **If this happens after you leave the clinic, call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number.** This reaction can be treated, and occurs in less than one in one million people who get the vaccine.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol, Temptra) may be given for fever or soreness. ASA (Aspirin) must NOT be given to anyone younger than 18 years old because of the risk of Reye syndrome.

Who should you report reactions to?

- Report any adverse or unexpected reactions to your local public health nurse, your doctor, or nurse practitioner as soon as possible.

Talk to a public health nurse:

- If you have questions or concerns about your or your child's reaction to an immunization.
- If you or your child had to go to a doctor, a hospital or to a health centre with a symptom that might be related to immunization.

What does this vaccine contain?

VARIVAX® III contains the Oka/Merck strain of the varicella virus (live, attenuated), sucrose, hydrolyzed gelatin, urea, sodium chloride, monosodium L-glutamate, sodium phosphate dibasic, potassium phosphate monobasic, potassium chloride, water, residual components of MRC-5 cells including DNA and protein, and trace quantities of neomycin and fetal bovine serum from MRC-5 culture media. Thimerosal-free. Latex-free.

VARILRIX® contains the Oka strain of the varicella zoster virus (live, attenuated), amino acids, lactose, mannitol, sorbitol and water, and traces of neomycin sulphate. Thimerosal-free. Latex-free. This vaccine is only for severely immunocompromised individuals and requires specialist approval.

Mature Minor Consent

It is recommended that parents/guardians discuss consent for immunization with their children. Efforts are first made to get parental/guardian consent for immunizations. However, children at least 13 years of age up to and including 17 years of age, who are able to understand the benefits and possible reactions for each vaccine and the risks of not getting immunized, can legally consent to or refuse immunizations in Saskatchewan by providing mature minor informed consent to a healthcare provider.

Provincial immunization fact sheets are available at www.saskatchewan.ca/immunize.

For more information, contact your local public health office, your physician, nurse practitioner, HealthLine online or by calling 811

References: Product monographs (VARILRIX® 2019; VARIVAX® III, 2020).