

# Varicella (chickenpox) vaccine

## Parent Information Sheet

NSW Health offers the vaccines recommended for adolescents by the National Health and Medical Research Council in a school vaccination program. Signed parental/guardian consent must be provided.

### Your next steps

- Carefully read this information sheet.
- If you would like your child to be vaccinated against varicella, complete the Consent Form and give the signed Consent Form to your child to return to school.
- If you do NOT wish your child to be vaccinated against varicella, do NOT complete or return the Consent Form.

### Q. What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is usually a mild disease of short duration in healthy children with symptoms such as slight fever, runny nose, feeling generally unwell and a skin rash that turns to blisters. However, it is more severe in adults and can cause serious and even fatal illness in individuals who are immunosuppressed. One in 4,000 cases will experience a sudden loss of muscle movement (acute cerebellar ataxia) while one in 100,000 will develop brain inflammation (encephalitis). Infection during pregnancy can result in congenital abnormalities in the baby, including skin scarring and limb defects.

### Q. How is chickenpox spread?

Early in the illness, chickenpox is spread by coughing. Later in the illness, the virus is spread by direct contact with the fluid in the blisters. The infection is highly contagious to people who have never had chickenpox or who have not been immunised. People are infectious from one or two days before the rash appears (that is, during the runny nose phase) and up to five days after (when the blisters have formed crusts or scabs).

### Q. How do vaccines work?

Vaccines work by triggering the immune system to fight certain infections. If a vaccinated person comes into contact with these infections, their immune system is able to respond more effectively, preventing the disease developing or greatly reducing its severity.

### Q. How effective is the vaccine?

A single dose of chicken pox vaccine is 80-85% effective in preventing chickenpox and very effective against severe disease.

### Q. Who should be vaccinated?

Students up to 14 years of age require a single dose of chickenpox vaccine, unless they have previously been vaccinated (usually at 18 months of age) or have had chickenpox disease. Students 14 years of age and older require two doses of chickenpox vaccine given at least 1-2 months apart via their doctor.

### Q. Who should not be vaccinated?

Chickenpox vaccine should not be given to people who:

- have had anaphylaxis following a previous dose of vaccine
- have had anaphylaxis following any of the vaccine additives (listed over the page)
- are pregnant (pregnancy should be avoided for 28 days after vaccination)
- have received a blood transfusion/immunoglobulin injection within the previous 12 months
- have received a live vaccine in the past 4 weeks (e.g. MMR (measles, mumps and rubella), BCG (tuberculosis) or yellow fever)
- have impaired immunity i.e.
  - i. people with HIV/AIDS
  - ii. people who are receiving high-dose
  - iii. immunosuppressive treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy or high-dose oral corticosteroids
  - iv. people with severe immunocompromise, including lymphoma, leukaemia or generalised malignancy.

**Q. What is anaphylaxis?**

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that may result in unconsciousness and death if not treated quickly. It occurs very rarely after any vaccination. The school immunisation nurses are fully trained in the treatment of anaphylaxis.

**Q. What should I do if I have no records or I cannot remember if my child has already had chickenpox or received vaccine?**

Children and adults can be safely vaccinated with chickenpox vaccine if there is an unknown history of chickenpox, or if there is no available evidence of previous vaccination with varicella vaccine.

**Q. What additives does chickenpox vaccine contain?**

The vaccine contains sucrose, hydrolysed porcine gelatin, urea, monosodium glutamate, residual components of MRC-5 cells, traces of neomycin and bovine serum. Additives are included in very small amounts to either assist the vaccine to work or to act as a preservative. The vaccine was exposed to bovine-derived materials during manufacture.

**Q. How safe are vaccines?**

Vaccines used in Australia are safe and must pass strict safety testing before being approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). In addition, the TGA monitors the safety of vaccines once they are in use.

**Q. What are the side effects of varicella vaccination?**

Side effects are commonly mild and usually involve redness, pain and swelling at the injection site or fever. Serious side effects are extremely rare. More information about side effects is available in the Consumer Medical Information (CMI) for the vaccine available from [www.health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination). Parents concerned about side effects after vaccination should contact their GP who should also make a report to the local public health unit.

**Q. Should the vaccine be given to a female student who is or thinks she may be pregnant?**

No. Any female student who is, or thinks she may be, pregnant should not be vaccinated. On the day of the clinic the vaccination nurse will ask female students if they are or could be pregnant. If a student answers yes to this question, she will not be vaccinated. The student will be urged to immediately discuss the issue with her parent/ guardian and to seek medical help. She will also be provided with contact details for a health referral service that will provide advice, support and guidance.

Female students who have received chickenpox vaccine should not become pregnant for 28 days after vaccination.

**Q. What if my child has asthma and takes cortisone or prednisone by a “puffer”?**

Chickenpox vaccine can be safely administered to someone who has asthma regardless of which medications they are taking.

**Q. Can I withdraw consent?**

Consent can be withdrawn at any time by providing the school with written notification of the withdrawal of consent or telephoning the school to withdraw consent.

**Q. What do I do if my child missed out on the vaccine because of illness or absence on the day of the nurses' visit?**

If vaccination has been missed at school, catch-up should occur as soon as possible. Parents should contact their local GP or pharmacist to arrange vaccination.

**Q. How can I access a record of the vaccinations?**

Information about your child's vaccinations will be uploaded to the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) so it can be linked to your child's existing immunisation history. Parents can request a copy of their child's AIR Immunisation History Statement at any time up to their child being 14 years of age, and students aged 14 years and over can request their own immunisation history statement, as follows:

- using the Medicare online account through myGov [my.gov.au/](http://my.gov.au/)
- using the Medicare Express Plus App [www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/subjects/expressplus-mobile-apps](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/subjects/expressplus-mobile-apps)
- calling the AIR General Enquiries Line on 1800 653 809.

**Q. What will happen to my child's information?**

The information you provide on the Consent Form is subject to strict confidentiality and privacy protections contained in NSW and Commonwealth legislation (see the enclosed Privacy Statement). The information will be entered into a NSW Health immunisation register and then uploaded to the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) so it can be linked to your child's existing immunisation history and viewed on MyGov.

**Q. Where can I find more information about school vaccination?**

More information is available:

- by visiting the NSW Health website at [www.health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination)
- by contacting your local public health unit on 1300 066 055