

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 fully recover 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 several days before the rash appears until the rash crusts over. It takes 10 to 21 days after exposure for someone to develop chickenpox.

Do I need to be concerned if my child has been exposed to chickenpox?

Your child is immune if he/she had chickenpox. Your child is protected against serious disease if he/she has received the vaccine.

Who needs the vaccine?

All children and adults without evidence of immunity to chickenpox need the vaccine. *You do NOT need the chickenpox vaccine if you meet any of the criteria for evidence of immunity.*

- 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 individuals with an impaired immune system. These individuals need to meet one of the other criteria for evidence of immunity.
- Receipt from a healthcare provider of a diagnosis of chickenpox or verification of a history of chickenpox
- Receipt from a healthcare provider of a diagnosis of herpes zoster (shingles), or verification of a history of herpes zoster.

What is the vaccine recommendation?

Two doses of chickenpox vaccine are recommended.

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 and adolescents over 13 years old 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.

Individuals that are not already immune should consider getting the vaccine if they

- live or work in places where exposure to chickenpox is likely, such as teachers of young children and day-care employees;
- live or work in crowded environments such as college students, inmates and staff of correctional institutions, and military personnel;
- are non-pregnant women of childbearing age;
- are adults and adolescents living in households with children;
- are international travelers.

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

Who should not receive the chickenpox vaccine?

- Those who 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 – 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 – ask your doctor);
 - treatment with drugs like long-term steroids; or
 - recent transfusion with blood or certain blood products.

What if my child hasn't had chickenpox?

- Most children and adults recover from chickenpox in about a week. Healthy children have mild cases of chickenpox while adults may have more severe disease and a higher incidence of 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.
- **Individuals with impaired immune systems 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.**