

Prevent Chickenpox with Immunizations

By Robert Williams, M.D.
Internal Medicine/Pediatrics

Childhood was a mix of great fun, a few bumps and bruises. Scraped knees, broken arms and chickenpox were just a part of growing up.

Your own children are probably experiencing some of these very same things today. However, science is beginning to prevent a few of these childhood pains. And while technology can't prevent skinned knees or broken arms, it can now provide protection against chickenpox with a single immunization.

Known medically as Varicella, chickenpox is caused by a highly contagious virus, which is easily transmitted even by coughing or sneezing and through direct contact with a person infected with chickenpox or shingles. It usually occurs in late winter and early spring months. The virus spreads throughout the blood to the skin and nerves. The virus can remain inactive (latent) in these nerves for years, often for a lifetime. If the virus becomes active again, it causes the disorder known as shingles, and the virus is then referred to as Herpes Zoster. It is not clear why the virus reactivates in some people and not others.

Shingles is a series of concentrated lesions that appear on the skin of individuals who have had chickenpox as a child. While only 10 to 20 percent of people who had chickenpox develop shingles, the lesions can spread the disease to those not immune. Nearly four million people develop chickenpox each year and about 14,000 people are hospitalized each year and about 100 previously healthy children die each year from chickenpox.

The Effects of Chickenpox on Children

Most children become infected with chickenpox by the time they are 10 years old.



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This is probably the best time to get chickenpox since children's immune systems are best suited to defend against the disease.

A bout with chickenpox is no walk through the park. Kids become irritable, develop a mild fever, lose their appetite, get headaches and, of course, develop blisters over most of their bodies. Between 250 and 500 blisters can appear anywhere from the scalp down to the toes. Calamine

lotion and oatmeal baths are two of the best products for reducing itching. Preventing your children from scratching themselves is important. Open blisters can scar or worse, cause a skin infection.

These symptoms only last four to seven days, but it takes seven to ten days for the disease to run its course. This recuperation time can take its toll on both you and your child. On average, your child will miss eight to nine school days. Every year an estimated \$750 million in job productivity is lost due to the parental care of children with chickenpox.

Science Makes a Breakthrough

Now, almost all the hassles of chickenpox can be eliminated. A new chickenpox vaccine called Varivax® was introduced to the public by Merck & Co., Inc. the first week of June 1995. Development of Varivax® began in early 1971. By 1982, a vaccine had been invented, but another 12 years of extensive research was done to ensure that the vaccine was safe to use and met Food and Drug Administration standards.

A single vaccination is given to healthy children as young as 12 to 18 months and as old as 13 years. After age

13, older children and adults need to
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Prevent Chickenpox with Immunizations continued...

have two doses of Varivax® spaced eight weeks apart.

To be eligible for the vaccine, a person, adult or child, must have no history of chickenpox, cannot be pregnant, and cannot have an immune-deficient disease such as HIV. If you're unsure whether your child has had chickenpox, a simple test can be given to verify immunity.

The vaccination has a few side effects, but they are minor compared to a full-blown case of chickenpox. Symptoms include five or six blisters around the area of the injection, a slight fever and possible soreness from the needle. These effects do not last long, but they may appear up to one month after the injection.

The symptoms of the vaccination are the same in an adult as they are in a child. If you're an adult who qualifies for the shots but are leery of the side effects, you are better off being immunized. An adult who gets an actual case of chickenpox can develop serious complications. The disease lasts longer, is more severe, often causes pneumonia and is more likely to cause hospitalization in adults over the age of 14.

For convenience sake, the chickenpox vaccination can be given simultaneously with other childhood immunizations such as a diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP) shot or a measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) shot. Otherwise, the shot should be scheduled one month after an MMR is given. An individual chickenpox injection generally costs between \$50 and \$60 and is covered under most health care policies. If you're unsure of coverage, call your insurance company before seeing your doctor.

With this latest immunization breakthrough, chickenpox may have a similar fate as polio. If enough people are vaccinated against chickenpox, less and less people become carriers of the disease. And if the

disease can't be spread, it cannot survive.

For more information, call Advanced HealthLine at (262) 512-2880 or toll-free at 1-888-709-2080 outside the Milwaukee metro area, or log on at www.ah.com.

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