The National Immunisation Program provides free chickenpox vaccine for children at 18 months of age and a catch-up dose for adolescents in Year 7 of secondary school who have not had chickenpox infection.

**Chickenpox (Varicella)**

Chickenpox is a highly contagious infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is spread through coughs and sneezes, and through direct contact with the fluid in the blisters of the rash.

It is usually a mild disease of short duration in healthy children; sometimes chickenpox will develop into more severe illness such as bacterial skin infections resulting in scarring, pneumonia or inflammation of the brain. Adults who become infected with chickenpox generally experience more severe symptoms. Chickenpox infection during pregnancy may be a risk to the unborn baby. Chickenpox can cause serious illness and even death in all ages.

The incubation period for chickenpox is 10 to 21 days, followed by the appearance of a rash of red spots initially, then becoming blisters within hours. The spots usually appear on the trunk, face and other parts of the body. Most people infected with chickenpox have a fever and feel unwell, and may experience severe itching.

Anyone who has never had chickenpox before can catch it. **Any person with a reliable history of chickenpox infection is considered immune and does not require the vaccine.** Prior to the vaccine program, about 75 per cent of people caught chickenpox before 12 years of age.

**Chickenpox vaccine**

The chickenpox vaccine contains modified live virus at a reduced strength and a small amount of the antibiotic, neomycin.

Research shows that two doses of chickenpox vaccine in children provides increased protection and reduces the risk of chickenpox occurring at a later time.

**Vaccine recommendations**

Free chickenpox vaccine is provided for:

- children aged 18 months unless they have already had chickenpox infection
- children in Year 7 of secondary school, unless they have already had chickenpox infection.

Two doses of chickenpox vaccine are recommended to increase protection in children. The additional dose must be purchased privately.

**Adolescents and adults**

The vaccine is also recommended for adolescents (14 years and older) and adults who have not had the disease. Persons in this age category with no known history of chickenpox should have a blood test to check for immunity. Many adults who do not have a history of chickenpox are actually immune. Chickenpox vaccine is especially recommended for non-immune people and people in high-risk occupations such as:

- healthcare workers
- teachers and workers in child-care centres
- non-immune women prior to pregnancy
- non-immune household contacts of immunosuppressed people.

People aged 14 years and older require two doses of the chickenpox vaccine, one to two months apart. People aged 14 years and older must purchase the vaccine privately.
Pre-immunisation checklist

Before you or your child are immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

☐ Are unwell on the day of immunisation (temperature over 38.5 °C)

☐ Has any severe allergies

☐ Has had a severe reaction following any vaccine

☐ Has a disease or is having a treatment which causes low immunity (for example HIV/AIDS, leukaemia, cancer, radiotherapy or chemotherapy)

☐ Is taking steroids of any sort other than inhaled asthma sprays or steroid creams (for example cortisone or prednisone)

☐ Are pregnant, or planning to become pregnant within one month of immunisation (and are actually receiving the vaccine)

☐ Has received immunoglobulin or a blood transfusion or any blood products in the past year.

People who are receiving immunisation should remain at the place of immunisation for 15 minutes.

Possible side effects of chickenpox vaccine

Reactions are generally mild and well tolerated and are much less frequent than the complications of the disease.

Common side effects

- high fever over 39 °C
- soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- a temporary small lump at the injection site.

If mild reactions do occur, they may last one to two days.

The side effects can be reduced by:

- drinking extra fluids and not overdressing if the person has a fever
- placing a cold wet cloth on the sore injection site
- taking paracetamol to reduce any discomfort (note the recommended dose for the weight of your child).

Uncommon side effects

About two to five chickenpox like spots may occur, usually at the injection site and sometimes on other parts of the body, between five and 26 days after vaccination, in up to five per cent of children.

If you or your child get a rash after having the chickenpox vaccine you or your child should avoid immunocompromised people until the rash goes away.

Extremely rare side effects

- severe allergic reaction.

If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or hospital.

Further information

The following websites provide further information:

www.immunise.health.gov.au

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Chickenpox (Varicella)