



Health and Wellness

Health PEI

Fact Sheet:

Varicella (Chickenpox) Vaccine

1. What is Varicella and what are the complications of this disease?

Varicella is a common and highly infectious disease which causes an irritating blister-like rash. The rash or fluid filled lesions break out in stages on all areas of the body including the scalp and mucous membranes of the mouth and throat. Following initial varicella illness, the varicella virus becomes inactive and establishes itself in the body's nerve endings, allowing it to reactivate later in life as shingles.

Varicella illness is caused by a virus which is spread by contact with nose and throat secretions such as coughing and sneezing or by direct contact with fluid from an infected skin lesion.

The complications of varicella infection include viral infections in the heart, lungs, joints, brain and blood, as well as secondary bacterial infection such as invasive group A streptococcal infection. A serious complication is the development of Reye's Syndrome, a brain disease which can occur when a child who has varicella is given a medication containing salicylates (acetylsalicylic acid, ASA). Varicella in pregnancy can result in birth defects in the baby and if a woman develops varicella just before or after delivery, the newborn is at increased risk of developing severe varicella disease.

2. What are the contents of the Varicella vaccine?

The vaccine contains live but weakened particles from Varicella virus from which the body develops protection. Traces of non-medicinal ingredients that keep the vaccine stable, sterile and help it to be more effective are also present.

All vaccine contents are licensed for use by the Biologics and Genetics Therapies Directorate within Health Canada. A complete listing of contents is included in the product insert which is available from the public health nurse.

3. What are the possible reactions from the vaccine and how should they be managed?

The most serious but rare side effect is a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) which can be life-threatening and which usually occurs within 15 to 20 minutes of receiving the vaccine. Procedures are in place for the nurse to quickly respond to anaphylaxis by administering adrenaline.

The most common reactions to this vaccine are generally mild, brief and tend to be delayed. These include pain, swelling and/or redness at the injection site, irritability and fever. A chickenpox-like rash may appear 5 to 26 days after immunization. Children who get this rash can continue to participate in daily activities as long as the rash is covered by clothing.

It is not necessary to give acetaminophen after immunization. If discomfort or fever does occur acetaminophen can relieve these symptoms. **Salicylates** (acetylsalicylic acid, ASA) **should not be given to a**