

Chickenpox and the Vaccine (Shot) to Prevent It

Last updated February 2014

The best way to protect against chickenpox is by getting the chickenpox (also called varicella) shot. Doctors recommend that all children who have never had chickenpox get the shot.

Why should my child get the chickenpox shot?

The chickenpox shot:

- Protects your child from chickenpox, a potentially serious and even deadly disease
- Prevents your child from feeling itchy and uncomfortable from chickenpox
- Keeps your child from missing school or childcare (and keeps you from missing work to care for your sick child)

Is the chickenpox shot safe?

Yes. The chickenpox shot is very safe, and it works very well to prevent chickenpox. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects, but most children who get the chickenpox shot have no side effects.

What are the side effects?

Most children don't have any side effects from the shot. However, some children may develop a reaction and symptoms may include:

- Soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given
- Fever
- Mild rash

There are two types of chickenpox shots. Talk to your child's doctor about which one your child will get.

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a disease that causes an itchy rash of blisters and a fever. A person with chickenpox may have a lot of blisters – as many as 500. The rash can spread over the whole body—even inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area. Chickenpox can be serious and even life-threatening, especially in babies, adults, and people with weakened immune systems.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox usually causes the following symptoms:

- An itchy rash of blisters
- Fever
- Headache
- Feeling tired



Doctors recommend that your child get two doses of the chickenpox shot for best protection. Your child will need one dose at each of the following ages:

- 12 through 15 months
- 4 through 6 years

Is it serious?

Chickenpox is usually mild in children, but the itching can be very uncomfortable. Children with chickenpox can miss up to one week of school or childcare.

Before the vaccine was available, about 4 million people got chickenpox each year in the United States. About 10,600 of those people were hospitalized, and 100 to 150 died each year.

In some cases, chickenpox can cause serious problems, such as:

- Skin infections
- Dehydration (not having enough water in the body)
- Pneumonia (an infection in the lungs)
- Swelling of the brain

How does chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads easily through the air when a person who has chickenpox coughs or sneezes. It can also spread by touching an infected person's blisters. Chickenpox can be spread 1 to 2 days before the infected person gets a rash until all the blisters have formed scabs.

Why not let my child get chickenpox naturally and build natural immunity?

Chickenpox can be a mild disease, but it isn't always. There's no way to know who will have a mild case and who will become very sick. When your child gets his or her chickenpox shots, he or she is getting immunity from chickenpox without the risk of serious complications of the disease.

Where can I learn more about the chickenpox shot and my child?

To learn more about the chickenpox shot, talk to your child's doctor, call 1-800-CDC-INFO, or visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents.