

# Varicella (VZ) Vaccine

## Get protected, get immunized.

- Vaccines make your immune system stronger. They build antibodies to help prevent diseases.
- Immunization is safe. It is much safer to get immunized than to get these diseases.

### What is the varicella vaccine?

The varicella vaccine protects against varicella (chickenpox). It also helps lower your risk of developing shingles.

### What is varicella?

Varicella is a virus that causes a fever and an itchy rash that looks like small, water-filled blisters. It is usually mild, but can be more serious in newborns, adults, and people with weak immune systems. People who get varicella can have:

- skin infections
- pneumonia (a type of lung infection)
- blood infections
- other deadly infections

After you get varicella, the virus stays in your body. It can become active again and cause shingles (a painful skin rash).

### Who is most at risk?

People with the highest risk of serious infections from varicella are:

- newborns
- adults
- people with weak immune systems

If you are pregnant and get varicella, there is a small risk of having a baby born with:

- a low birthweight
- eyesight (vision) problems
- scars on the skin
- birth defects (such as poor development of the brain or an arm or leg)

If you get varicella a few days before or after you have your baby, the baby has a high risk of getting very sick or dying.

### How does it spread?

Varicella spreads easily through the air by coughing, sneezing or touching open blisters. You can spread varicella before you get the rash.

### Who should get the varicella vaccine?

The following people can get the varicella vaccine:

- children starting at age 12 months who are not getting the combined measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella (MMR-Var) vaccine
- younger babies who are age 6 to 11 months and are going to have an organ transplant
- anyone born before August 1, 2012, who has not had varicella (Adults need a blood test to check if they need the vaccine.)
- children born on or after August 1, 2012, who did not get a varicella vaccine as a baby (They may need this vaccine even if they had varicella.)

### How many doses do I need?

People born on or after August 1, 2005, need 2 doses of a varicella vaccine. As of January 1, 2021, children get their first dose at age 12 months and the second dose at age 18 months. If your child did not get a varicella vaccine at age 18 months, they will get it at age 4 years. Any doses a child gets before age 12 months do not count as part of the 2 doses they need to protect them against varicella.

If you were born before August 1, 2005, you need 1 or 2 doses of a varicella vaccine. This depends on when you got your first dose. Ask a public health nurse to find out how many doses you or your child needs.

### Are there other vaccines that protect against varicella?

The MMR-Var vaccine protects against measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) and varicella (Var). Most babies and children get this vaccine as part of the routine immunization schedule.

### How well does the vaccine work?

The protection is about 93% after 1 dose and about 98% after 2 doses.

## Where can I get the varicella vaccine?

You can get the vaccine at your local public health or community health centre.

If you are eligible for just 1 dose of varicella vaccine and you want a second dose of varicella vaccine, you will need to pay for it. Contact a travel health clinic or talk to your doctor or pharmacist to find out.

## Are there side effects from the varicella vaccine?

There can be side effects from the varicella vaccine. They tend to be mild and go away in a few days, but side effects can happen up to 6 weeks after having this vaccine. They may include:

- a rash, redness, swelling, bruising, itching, or feeling stiff, numb, or sore where you had the needle
- a fever
- a varicella-like rash with water-filled blisters or a rash without water-filled blisters

At least 1 out of 100 people who got this vaccine reported 1 or more of these side effects. In some cases, it is unknown if the vaccine caused these side effects.

It is important to stay at the clinic for 15 minutes after your vaccine. Some people may have a rare but serious allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. If anaphylaxis happens, you will get medicine to treat the symptoms.

It is rare to have a serious side effect after a vaccine. Call Health Link at 811 to report any serious or unusual side effects.

## How can I manage side effects?

- To help with soreness and swelling, put a cool, wet cloth over the area where you had the needle.
- There is medicine to help with a fever or pain. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are not sure what medicine or dose to take. Follow the directions on the package.
- People, especially those under the age of 18 years should **not** take aspirin for 6 weeks after getting a vaccine that protects against varicella (unless your doctor tells you to take it) because it can cause serious health problems.
- If you get a rash that looks like varicella, keep it covered. If you cannot cover the rash, stay away from anyone who is pregnant, newborn babies, and people with weak immune systems. If you have more than 50 spots, call Health Link at 811.

- Some people with health problems, such as a weak immune system, must call their doctor if they get a fever. If you have been told to do this, call your doctor even if you think the fever is from the vaccine.

## Who should not get the varicella vaccine?

You may not be able to get this vaccine if :

- You have an allergy to any part of the vaccine.
- You had a severe (serious) or unusual side effect after this vaccine or one like it.
- You have a weak immune system (because of medicine you take or a health problem).
- You have a family history of a weak immune system.
- You had a blood product in the past 11 months.
- You had another live vaccine in the past 3 months.
- You are pregnant.

If you are planning to get pregnant, wait 1 month after having this vaccine before you start trying to get pregnant.

If you have allergies or have had a side effect from this vaccine in the past, check with your doctor or a public health nurse before you get the vaccine.

Although you can get the vaccine if you have a mild illness, such as a cold or fever, you should stay home until you are feeling better to prevent spreading your illness to others.

## I have a fear of needles. How can I prepare for my immunization?

Many adults and children are afraid of needles. You can do many things before, during, and after immunization to be more comfortable.



Scan the QR code, visit [ahs.ca/vaccinecomfort](https://ahs.ca/vaccinecomfort), or call Health Link at 811 for information.

## For more information about immunization



Call Health Link at 811



Scan the QR code or go to [ahs.ca/immunize](https://ahs.ca/immunize)