

As parents, many of us remember having chickenpox — and the school vacation that went with it — and as is typically the case, our memories treat us kindly so that we don't recall the itching, fever and rash that we endured. Unfortunately for some, time-lapsed memories can't erase the pain caused by this seemingly benign childhood infection. Mothers, fathers, siblings and grandparents who experienced the death of loved ones caused by chickenpox live among us. In fact, each year, before the chickenpox vaccine, about 50 to 100 families learned in the harshest way possible that infections with chickenpox can be deadly.

Q. What is chickenpox?

A. Chickenpox is caused when varicella zoster virus infects the upper respiratory tract (nose, throat, breathing tubes) or conjunctiva (surface of the eye). The virus can be transmitted by respiratory secretions, such as from coughs or sneezes, or by direct contact, such as from blisters on the skin. Chickenpox is so contagious that usually every susceptible person in the home of an infected individual will also get it. Many times the household contacts have even more blisters. In rare cases, pregnant women can transmit the virus to their unborn babies before birth.

Q. What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

A. People with chickenpox usually have fever, a rash that starts on the head and spreads to the rest of the body, and itching. A typical person will have 300 to 500 blisters which appear in phases, so that not all blisters are at the same stage.

Complications from chickenpox are more likely in teens, adults, infants younger than 1 year old, newborns whose mom developed the rash around the time of delivery, and people with immune compromising conditions. Common complications include pneumonia, encephalitis (infection of the brain) and bacterial infections, such as group A streptococcus infection (commonly known as "flesh-eating bacteria"). Women who are infected during pregnancy may deliver babies with birth defects, such as severe developmental delay or shortened limbs.

Although rare, death can occur from chickenpox or the complications associated with it. Before a vaccine was available, each year 50 to 100 people died from chickenpox; most were previously healthy adolescents and adults.

Q. What is my child's risk of getting chickenpox?

A. Since the chickenpox vaccine has been introduced, there has been an impressive decline in the number of varicella infections each year. Whereas before the vaccine about 4 million people were diagnosed with chickenpox each year, more recently, the number has dropped to tens of thousands of people each year. Unfortunately, that is still a lot of sick people, and the disease is far from being controlled, so vaccination is important.

Q. How is the chickenpox vaccine made?

A. The chickenpox vaccine is made using live, weakened varicella virus. The vaccine virus is weakened by growing it in cells other than the type it is used to growing in, so that when the vaccine is administered, it grows well enough to cause immunity, but not well enough to cause illness.

Q. Who should get the chickenpox vaccine?

A. The chickenpox vaccine is recommended for all children between 12 and 15 months of age and again between 4 and 6 years of age. Older children and adults who did not have the vaccine or disease should also get two doses.



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Chickenpox: What you should know

Q. Who should not get the chickenpox vaccine?

A. People with the following conditions should not get the chickenpox vaccine: cancers and some immune deficiencies, including HIV; allergies to gelatin; those on long-term immunosuppressive therapy or high-dose steroids; those who recently received blood products or immunoglobulins; and women who are pregnant.

Q. Is the chickenpox vaccine safe?

A. Yes. The side effects associated with getting the chickenpox vaccine can include tenderness at the site of the shot, low fever or mild rash, typically around the area of the shot, but not always.

Q. Does the chickenpox vaccine cause shingles?

A. People who get the chickenpox vaccine have a lower risk of getting shingles later in life than those who were infected with the natural virus. Studies have also shown that if vaccinated individuals get shingles, they experience less severe symptoms than those who were infected naturally.

Q. Can my child get the chickenpox vaccine if I'm pregnant?

A. Yes. While pregnant women are not recommended to get the chickenpox vaccine, children or others in the home with them may get the vaccine.

Q. My child is being treated for cancer and cannot get the vaccine. What can I do to protect him?

A. Because your child is immune-compromised, he is more likely to suffer complications during an infection with chickenpox; therefore, you should decrease his chances of coming into contact with the virus. To do this you should: make sure everyone who will be around your child has already had chickenpox or been immunized; keep your child away from anyone with chickenpox; and make sure the school nurse or daycare center is aware of the situation in the event that someone in the school is diagnosed with the disease.

Q. I heard of chickenpox parties. What's the harm in exposing my child this way?

A. Chickenpox parties have been held by parents who prefer their child get chickenpox disease instead of the vaccine. During these "parties," children are intentionally exposed to infected children and their belongings, such as cups, lollipops, clothing, and toys in the hope that they, too, develop chickenpox. Because complications and death can occur during chickenpox infections and because the chickenpox vaccine is safe, chickenpox vaccine — and not chickenpox parties — is the safest way to protect your child from chickenpox.

Q. Do the benefits of the chickenpox vaccine outweigh the risks?

A. Yes. Before the chickenpox vaccine, every year about 10,000 people were hospitalized and about 50 to 100 died from chickenpox. On the other hand, the chickenpox vaccine does not cause any severe side effects. So, the benefits of getting the chickenpox vaccine outweigh the risk.



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