



2008 Immunization Issue Brief

Varicella (Chicken Pox)

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The face of chickenpox

In 1998, an 8-year-old girl was seen in the Emergency Department of a hospital. For several days she had low-grade fever and blisters appearing over her entire body. The girl had chickenpox. At first her mother was relieved at the diagnosis. Chickenpox is, after all, a mild infection. But then the child had progressive difficulty breathing. Her breathing became rapid, shallow and difficult. A chest X-ray showed that she had pus between her lungs and chest wall (called an “empyema”). The pus caused one lung to be constricted. The child was admitted to the intensive care unit, but it was too late. She died the next day. **Before the chickenpox vaccine, about one child in this country would die every week from chickenpox — most of these children were previously healthy.**

The Varicella vaccine is given to prevent chickenpox and the severe, and occasionally fatal, consequences of chickenpox. This vaccine is given to children between 12 and 15 months and again between 4 and 6 years of age. Children, adolescents and young adults who have received only one dose should also get a second dose. For previously un-immunized adolescents (13 to 18 years old) or adults, the vaccine is given as a series of two shots, separated by four to eight weeks.

How contagious is chickenpox?

Take 100 people sitting in a room together for several hours talking. If only one person has chickenpox, and the other 99 have never been infected with chickenpox or vaccinated with the chickenpox vaccine, then about 85 of the 99 will get chickenpox!

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Should teenagers and adults get the Varicella vaccine?

Any teenager or adult who has not had chickenpox or the chickenpox

vaccine should receive the vaccine. Adults are 10 times more likely than children to be hospitalized with the severe consequences of chickenpox. These consequences include pneumonia and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Do the benefits of the Varicella vaccine outweigh its risks?

Before the Varicella vaccine was recommended for use in all children in 1995, about 4 million children were infected every year. In addition, chickenpox caused about 10,000 hospitalizations and 100 deaths a year — most of these hospitalizations and deaths occurred in previously healthy young children. So, although chickenpox causes much less severe disease, permanent disabilities, and death than other diseases such as polio, measles or rubella, it still is an important cause of severe disease in children. On the other hand, the Varicella vaccine does not have serious side effects. Therefore, the benefits of the Varicella vaccine clearly outweigh its risks.

For More Information

About Varicella, contact:

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