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WILLIAM LYON MACKENZIE C.I.

**IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO STUDENTS:**

Dear Student:

Toronto Public Health has received notification of a possible case of chickenpox in your school. This letter is being sent to all students to provide information about chickenpox.

**Students exposed to chickenpox**

If you have ever had chickenpox, you are protected. Although chickenpox is a mild disease for most people, some are at higher risk of becoming very ill. **High-risk groups** include newborns, pregnant women, children with leukemia, people with weak immune systems, people with serious illness or people on steroid treatment. If you are in this high-risk group, you should be seen by a physician to discuss your risk and what can be done.

**Students with chickenpox**

If you have chickenpox and have been in contact with anyone in a high-risk group (as listed above) while contagious (2 days before the rash begins to 5 days after the first blisters appear), contact these people immediately. Tell them they have been exposed to chickenpox and they need to see a doctor as soon as possible. Their physicians can call Toronto Public Health for further information.

If you get chickenpox, you can return to school when you are able to participate in all activities, even if you still have a rash. Chickenpox is most contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears when it spreads through the air by coughing and sneezing. Chickenpox is usually diagnosed after the rash appears so keeping students home from school does not stop the spread of chickenpox.

**Preventing chickenpox**

A vaccine for chickenpox is now available. If you have not yet had chickenpox or the vaccine, we recommend that you should see your doctor to get vaccinated.

Additional information on chickenpox is available in the attached Fact Sheet: [Chickenpox Disease and Vaccine Information](#)

If you have any questions or wish to discuss this in more detail, please call Muna Suleiman, Communicable Disease Investigator, from Toronto Public Health at 416 338 - 8777.

Yours truly,

Muna Suleiman  
Communicable Disease Investigator  
Toronto Public Health

# Fact Sheet

## Chickenpox (Varicella) Disease and Vaccine Fact Sheet

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common childhood illness caused by varicella zoster virus that usually gets better without medicines. In adulthood, the virus can reactivate causing a painful rash called shingles.

### What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox usually begins with a fever, cough, sore throat and general aches and pains. About 2 days later, itchy red spots appear on the skin and become small fluid-filled blisters.

### How can chickenpox be treated?

For most children, chickenpox will get better on its own. Creams can be used to stop the itching rash. If your child has a fever, it is safe to use acetaminophen (Tylenol, Tempra, Panadol). Do not give your child aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) as it can cause a serious illness called Reye Syndrome. Sometimes severe chickenpox is treated with specific medications that act against the virus.

### How can someone get chickenpox?

Chickenpox spreads through the air from coughing and sneezing or by directly touching the rash (blisters). Chickenpox is most contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash appears. It is contagious until all the blisters have scabbed over, usually in 5 days.

### Who is at risk of getting chickenpox?

Anyone who has never had chickenpox or the vaccine is at risk. People who grew up in tropical countries have a higher chance of getting chickenpox as an adult.

### What are the complications that can happen when someone gets chickenpox infection?

Chickenpox blisters can sometimes get infected. In rare cases, chickenpox can cause severe complications such as pneumonia (lung infection), blood infections, severe skin infection (flesh eating disease), encephalitis (brain swelling) and birth defects in pregnant women. These complications tend to be more severe in adults and those with a weak immune system.

### What are the risks of chickenpox for pregnant women?

If a pregnant woman gets chickenpox, there is a small chance that her baby may get chickenpox and could have birth defects. If she gets chickenpox close to the delivery, the newborn baby can get very sick. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox and have been in contact with a person with chickenpox or shingles, see your doctor immediately.

### When can my child with chickenpox return to school?

Staying home from school or daycare is not necessary if a child feels well enough. The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that a child with mild chickenpox who is able to participate normally in all activities should be allowed to return to school even if they still have a rash. Once the rash appears, it is usually too late to prevent exposure to classmates and teachers. Fortunately, a vaccine is available to prevent chickenpox.

### I have been exposed to chickenpox and have never had it before, what can I do?

Stay away from pregnant women, newborns and people with weak immune systems. The chickenpox vaccine can prevent chickenpox or severe infection if it is given within 3 to 5 days of being exposed to a person with chickenpox. People with certain medical conditions who cannot get the vaccine can take anti-

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viral medications or immunoglobulin, a blood product with antibodies to prevent infection if given within 10 days from contact with a case of chickenpox.

## How can I protect myself or my child from getting chickenpox?

Children, teenagers or adults who have had chickenpox in the past are protected for life. Two doses of vaccine (Varilrix®, VarivaxIII®, Priorix-Tetra®) protect almost everyone and can reduce the chance of getting very sick. Children at least 12 months of age born on or after January 1st, 2000 who have not had chickenpox can receive two doses of vaccine free as part of their routine childhood vaccines. The first dose is given at 15 months and the second before school entry (4 to 6 years of age) as part of Priorix-Tetra® (a vaccine that combines protection against mumps, measles, rubella and chickenpox).

## Who else can get the vaccine for free?

People with certain medical conditions who are at high risk for severe chickenpox infection can also get the vaccine. Talk to your doctor to see whether you are eligible.

## How many shots of chickenpox vaccine do I need?

Everyone 12 months of age and older who has not had chickenpox should receive two doses of chickenpox vaccine. The two doses of vaccine are free for children at least 12 months of age who are born on or after January 1st, 2000.

## Who should not get the chickenpox vaccine?

- Pregnant women (women should not get pregnant for one month after getting the vaccine).
- Those with a weak immune system, check with your doctor.
- Those who had a live vaccine (e.g. MMR, yellow fever) in the last 28 days.
- Those who had a blood product (blood or plasma transfusion, or serum immunoglobulin) in the last 3 to 11 months.
- Those with untreated tuberculosis (Varivax®III only).
- Those who had an allergic reaction to a varicella vaccine in the past.

## What are the side effects of this vaccine?

Redness, soreness and swelling where the needle was given are common. Fever is less common and sometimes, a mild chickenpox-like rash can occur 1 to 2 weeks after getting the vaccine. The rash gets better on its own and should be covered. If the rash cannot be covered, stay away from pregnant women, newborns and people with weak immune systems. Serious allergic reactions are rare and include trouble breathing, a rash or swelling in the throat and face. See a health care provider immediately if a serious reaction occurs.

## How do I keep track of my immunizations?

Update your personal immunization card (yellow card) and keep it in a safe place! Parents should send information on their children's vaccines to Toronto Public Health's Immunization Information Line at 416-392-1250.