

The chickenpox vaccine can protect your child against a severe case of chickenpox and prevent the discomfort and possible serious complications the disease can cause.

- **When should my child get the chickenpox vaccine?** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a single dose of the chickenpox vaccine for all children between 12 and 18 months of age who have not had chickenpox. Older children should be immunized at the earliest opportunity, also with a single dose. For healthy children older than 13 who have not had chickenpox and have never been immunized against the disease, two doses of the vaccine are required, 4 to 8 weeks apart.
- **What are the benefits of vaccinating my child against chickenpox?** Although chickenpox is usually mild, vaccinating all children at age 1 can prevent serious medical problems. Parents have to miss work while their children are home from school or child care. A child with chickenpox misses 8 or 9 days of school, and adult caretakers can lose up to 2 weeks of work.

Immunization with the chickenpox vaccine will prevent most children from getting chickenpox. If vaccinated children do get chickenpox, they generally have a much milder form of the disease. They have fewer skin lesions (13-32), a lower fever, and recover more quickly. In fact, the disease may be so mild that the skin lesions look like insect bites. Even so, vaccinated children with a mild case of chickenpox can still infect others at risk of getting chickenpox.

- **Is the vaccine safe?** Before becoming available, a chickenpox vaccine was tested in over 9,400 healthy children and over 1,600 adults in the United States. Since the chickenpox vaccine was licensed in 1995, several million doses of vaccine have been given to children in the United States. Studies continue to show the vaccine to be safe and effective.

Side effects from the chickenpox vaccine generally are mild and can rarely include:

- Soreness
- Tiredness
- Fussiness
- Fever
- Nausea
- Swelling where the shot was given

Also, in a small percentage of people who are vaccinated, 7% - 8%, a rash of several small bumps or pimples may develop at the spot where the shot was given or on other parts of the body. This can occur up to 1 month after the immunization and can last for several days.

- **Who should NOT receive the vaccine?** Although the chickenpox vaccine is approved for use in healthy children, there are certain groups of people who should not receive it, such as:
 - children with a weakened immune system

- children with life-threatening allergy to gelatin or antibiotics neomycin
- pregnant women

- **What is this disease?** Chickenpox has been one of the most common childhood illnesses. It is usually mild and not life-threatening to healthy children. The most obvious sign of chickenpox is a blistering rash that develops on your child's scalp and body, and then spreads to the face, arms, and legs over a period of 3-4 days. The rash forms itchy blisters that dry up into scabs 2-4 days later. School-age children often get a mild fever for 1-2 days before the rash appears.

Other symptoms of chickenpox are:

- coughing
- fussiness
- loss of appetite
- headaches

Chickenpox can easily be spread in any of the following ways:

- by direct contact with an infected person, usually through fluid from broken blisters.
- through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes (most common before rash)
- through direct contact with lesions (sores) from a person with shingles

A person with chickenpox is contagious from 1-2 days before the rash starts and for up to 5 days after the rash appears. A child will have to stay home from child care or school until she is no longer contagious. An adult or child who has never had chickenpox is at risk of get it and will show symptoms 10-21 days after being exposed to the virus. 80% to 90% of at-risk persons will develop chickenpox if they are exposed to a family member who has it.

- **Who gets chickenpox?** Before the vaccine became available, there were about 4 million cases of chickenpox in the United States each year. Anyone can get chickenpox at any age, but it occurs most frequently in children from ages 6-10. Chickenpox can occur at any time of the year. Peak times are in the winter and early spring, especially in moderate climates.
- **What is the treatment for chickenpox?** You may remember how itchy chickenpox was when you were a child. If your child scratches the blisters before they are able to heal, they can become infected, turn into small sores, and possibly leave scars.

Oatmeal baths can help relieve itching and acetaminophen may help reduce your child's fever. Acetaminophen is a substitute for aspirin. **DO NOT GIVE YOUR CHILD ASPIRIN OR SALICYLATE** (a compound found in aspirin). They are associated with Reye's syndrome, a disease that affects the liver and brain. If your child's fever lasts longer than 4 days, rises above 102° F after the third day of having chickenpox, or your child becomes dehydrated, call your pediatrician. Also let your pediatrician know if the rash gets very red, warm, or tender. It may mean that your child has a secondary infection and needs other treatment.

The drug acyclovir can help make a case of chickenpox less severe, if used early. Acyclovir is most often used for patients who are at risk of developing severe chickenpox, such as adolescents; children with certain skin or lung diseases; and children taking other prescribed medications, such as steroids. To be effective, acyclovir must be given within the first 24 hours of the onset of the chickenpox rash.

- **Can chickenpox cause complications?** Most healthy children who get chickenpox won't have any complications from the disease. However EACH YEAR in the United States, about 9,000 people are hospitalized for chickenpox and about 90 people DIE FROM THE DISEASE.

The most common complication from chickenpox is a BACTERIAL INFECTION of the skin. The next most common problems are PNEUMONIA and ENCEPHALITIS, an infection of the brain. The following groups of people are at higher risk of developing these problems:

- people who have weak immune systems or low resistance to disease
- infants under 1 year of age
- adolescents and adults
- newborns whose mothers had chickenpox around the time of delivery
- premature infants whose mothers have not had chickenpox
- children with eczema and other skin conditions
- children receiving therapy with salicylate (a compound found in aspirin)

Adults are more than 20 times likely to die from the disease. If a pregnant woman gets chickenpox, her unborn baby may have complications.

What is "shingles"? Once someone has had chickenpox, the virus stays in the body of the infected person permanently. Later in life, the virus can reactivate and cause shingles. Shingles can occur at any age. It is most common after age 50. About 10% to 20% of all people who have had chickenpox develop shingles. People with shingles typically feel numbness and itching or severe pain in the skin areas where the affected nerve roots are. Within 3 to 4 days a patch of blister-like sores develop and last for 2 to 3 weeks.