

Can I breastfeed after I have had the vaccine?

You can continue to breastfeed, as studies have shown that the virus is not transferred to babies through breast milk.

Do I need to have a blood test to check my immunity to VZV after I have completed the course of vaccine?

No, post-vaccination testing is not routinely recommended.

Will I need a booster dose of vaccine?

Studies of healthcare workers up to 8 years after they were vaccinated have shown that they have a VZV infection attack rate of 10%. This suggests that, following the initial two doses, additional booster doses may be required later in life. This is under investigation but is not currently recommended.

I have been exposed to chicken pox – can I have the vaccine?

Varicella vaccine can be used to prevent infection in susceptible individuals exposed to VZV if administered within 3 days of exposure. However, protection is less than 100%, with mild cases of infectious chickenpox occurring, especially after household exposure. You will still need to look out for signs of chickenpox if you receive the post exposure vaccine.

Further copies of this leaflet are available from NHS Plus: Email: nhsplus@nhs.net

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Introduction

This leaflet is for healthcare workers* and provides information on the varicella zoster virus (the virus that causes chickenpox and shingles) vaccine.

Varicella vaccine

The varicella vaccine is recommended for healthcare workers who are susceptible to varicella zoster virus (VZV), the virus that causes chickenpox and shingles. It is a live vaccine (made from a weakened form of VZV), and in healthy adults, two doses given 4–8 weeks apart give 75% protection against chickenpox. In addition, the vaccine is virtually 100% effective in preventing severe disease. If you still get chickenpox after vaccination, it is usually mild, involving fewer skin lesions, and a quicker recovery.

Why should I have the varicella vaccine?

The varicella vaccine is recommended if you are not immune to VZV, have direct contact with patients and work in general practice or hospital settings. This is because you are at risk of catching the infection from patients and potentially passing it on to vulnerable patients.

If you are a healthcare professional, your registration body may produce ethical guidance on this. For example, General Medical Council guidance (*Good medical practice*) for doctors states that ‘you should protect your patients, your colleagues, and yourself by being immunised against common serious communicable diseases where vaccines are available’.

* Healthcare workers are workers who have direct contact with patients, such as doctors, nurses and physiotherapists, and workers who have contact with patients but are not clinical, such as receptionists, porters and ward clerks.

Can everyone have the vaccine?

The vaccine is not recommended if you:

- have had an allergic reaction to any varicella vaccine or to one of its components (including gelatin or neomycin)
- have any illness that weakens the immune system
- have recently received or are still taking any treatment that can weaken the immune system
- are pregnant or even possibly pregnant.

The vaccine may need to be delayed if you:

- have a high temperature or an infection
- have had a blood or plasma transfusion, or human immunoglobulin within the last 3 months
- have had another live vaccine in the last 4 weeks
- are due to undergo treatment that might weaken your immune system.

What are the side effects of the vaccine?

The vaccine is generally well tolerated. The most common side-effect is soreness and swelling at the site of the injection. Very rarely, an allergic reaction may occur.

About 5–10% of adults may experience a fever or chickenpox-like rash around the injection site or less often scattered over the body in the first month after vaccination. The rash following vaccine is almost always mild and much less severe than natural chickenpox. If you develop a rash, you need to contact your occupational health (OH) department for advice on your fitness for work.

Can the vaccine cause chickenpox or shingles?

As the vaccine is made from a weakened form of VZV it is possible to develop mild symptoms of

chickenpox (explained in the side-effects section above).

The vaccine can very rarely cause shingles, but the risk of getting shingles naturally is higher.

If I develop a rash after having the vaccine, am I infectious?

If you develop a chickenpox rash after vaccination, you can, very rarely, pass on VZV to others. The risk is not as high as the risk of passing the virus on from natural chickenpox infection.

If you do develop a chickenpox rash, you should contact your OH department. They may advise you to avoid contact with patients.

Can I go to work after I have received this vaccine?

You can work after you have received the vaccine. However, if you develop a rash as described above, you should contact your OH department and they will advise you further.

Can I have vaccine if I have regular contact with someone with a weakened immune system?

You may have the vaccine if you have close or regular contact with someone who has a weakened immune system. In fact, the vaccine is specifically recommended in these cases.

Can I have vaccine if I am trying to get pregnant?

You should not have the vaccine if you are trying to get pregnant, and pregnancy should be avoided for 3 months after vaccination.