

Recommendations for basic vaccination against chickenpox for adolescents.

Why vaccinate against chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious viral disease which is transmitted from person to person. The disease occurs mostly in children and is manifested by fever, tiredness and itchy spots in the form of red marks which become vesicles before drying up, forming scabs and then sometimes leaving scars. In children, chickenpox is an unpleasant but mostly benign disease. The risk of complications is much greater when adults are affected. It is estimated that every year in Switzerland 3,000 persons over the age of 16 years suffer from chickenpox, sixty to seventy of whom require hospitalisation because of complications. These complications are bacterial dermatitis, pneumonia, meningitis and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), which can be severe or even fatal. If one considers 100,000 patients, two children will die from complications linked to chickenpox, the number of deaths arising to 30 when the patients are over 16 years of age. As the varicella virus remains in the body, an outbreak of shingles may occur, often years later. Finally, chickenpox presents a very serious risk for pregnant women (severe pneumonia, deformities in the child), for newborns and for persons with a compromised immune system. It is therefore imperative to protect all those who did not catch chickenpox in their childhood. This is possible thanks to vaccination.

What is the ideal age for vaccination against chickenpox?

In children, chickenpox is mostly benign. The vaccination is therefore only recommended for adolescents aged from 11 to 15 years who have not yet had chickenpox. If there is any doubt, vaccination is also indicated: if antibodies already exist, they immediately neutralise the vaccine, without any side effects. The vaccination is also recommended for young adults (below the age of 40 years) who have not had the disease, especially women who wish to have children (pregnancy must be avoided for one month after each dose of the vaccine). If a person says that he/she has had chickenpox, this can be considered as reliable. If in doubt, a blood test to determine the level of antibodies against chickenpox may be helpful to define whether a vaccination is necessary or not.

Vaccination against chickenpox is also indicated for persons (children and adults) who are in contact with a pregnant woman who has not had chickenpox or with persons who are at increased risk of complications (persons with severe eczema, leukaemia or cancer, those awaiting organ transplants or before any treatment with immunosuppressive drugs). Finally, vaccination is sometimes necessary already during childhood for those suffering from severe eczema or certain serious illnesses. If you feel that your child should be protected against chickenpox, do not hesitate to discuss this with your doctor.

Not vaccinating adolescents against chickenpox means increased risk.

Chickenpox is so infectious that practically everyone catches it. If this happens in childhood the disease is mostly benign and results in lifelong immunity. If chickenpox occurs in adolescents and adults, however, there is an increased risk of complications and hospitalisation is often necessary. If one catches chickenpox, this also represents a risk of infection for the members of the patient's family and others with whom he/she comes into contact, especially pregnant women and newborns who risk being infected.

The chickenpox vaccine.

The chickenpox vaccine contains viruses which have been weakened so that they can no longer cause the disease. These viruses are produced in the laboratory, on cell cultures. They are live, weakened viruses able to mimic a natural infection and stimulate a potent immune defence effectively and over a long period. The chickenpox vaccines contain traces of an antibiotic (neomycin) and cells that were used in their production, as well as various stabilising substances. They do not contain mercury. The vaccine provides more than 80% protection against any chickenpox infection and over 90% protection against severe or complicated cases. Most persons who are vaccinated therefore do not catch the disease, while the rest may only have mild chickenpox: they have less fever and less skin rash, and they recover sooner than if they had not been vaccinated. In adolescents and adults, the vaccination requires 2 doses, administered at an interval of at least 4 weeks. Children (under the age of 11 years) need only one dose. The chickenpox vaccine can be given simultaneously with other vaccines.

When must the vaccination against chickenpox not be given?

The chickenpox vaccination is not indicated in young healthy children. In adolescents and young adults, the vaccination must not be given during pregnancy (pregnancy must be prevented for one month after each vaccine dose). In the case of mild illness, it is sufficient to delay the vaccination by 1 to 2 weeks. The vaccination must be avoided in those whose immune system is compromised and in those who are being treated by immunosuppressive drugs (cortisone in particular). The second dose is contraindicated in those persons having had a severe allergic reaction (about 1 case per million) to the first dose or to neomycin. Should you have any doubt, do not hesitate to ask your doctor.

Side effects of the chickenpox vaccination.

The chickenpox vaccination is generally well tolerated. In one out of 3–5 persons, there may be redness or swelling at the injection site, which rapidly disappear. Slight fever (in one out of 10–20 persons) or a slight chickenpox-like rash (one in every 20–25 persons) may appear between 7 and 21 days after the vaccination. Other side effects (e.g. pneumonia) are extremely rare. Other health problems have been reported after chickenpox vaccination, but so rarely (less than one per 100,000 to one per million) that it is difficult to say whether the vaccination was their cause or not. If a special problem worries you, do not hesitate to speak to your doctor.

Cost of the chickenpox vaccination.

Federal health authorities consider the vaccination of adolescents and young adults against chickenpox to be so important that its cost is covered by the basic health insurance.

Your doctor recommends the chickenpox vaccination from adolescence.

Your doctor recommends that all adolescents and young adults who have not had chickenpox should be protected with a vaccination. You should not hesitate to speak to your doctor, who will be pleased to answer your questions.

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Doctor's Stamp



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