

# Vaccine Information Sheet

## **VARIVAX – Varicella (chicken pox) vaccine**

### **What is VARIVAX**

VARIVAX is a vaccine used to help prevent Varicella, also known as chicken pox.

Varicella is a viral illness. The primary illness is chickenpox, and the reactivation of the latent virus, often later in life, is known as herpes zoster (shingles).

The VZV virus is transmitted through respiratory secretions. Chickenpox is highly contagious, and is spread through the air, by coughing, sneezing or direct contact with people who are infected. About 90% of unvaccinated people who have not previously had chickenpox will become infected when they come into contact with the virus.

Symptoms of chickenpox include vesicular skin lesions and fever. Complications can include bacterial infection to the skin, pneumonia, encephalitis and cerebellar ataxia, thrombocytopenia and hepatitis. Infection in adults is usually more severe than in children.

Working in the healthcare field can increase the risk of infection. Varivax vaccine can help to prevent these diseases.

### **What is in the vaccine and how does it work**

The vaccine contains a weakened form of the chicken pox virus, and is injected into the body. The body then produces its own protection by making disease-fighting substances (antibodies) to fight the virus. The vaccine itself cannot cause the infection. If a vaccinated person comes into contact with live virus the body is usually ready, and produces antibodies to destroy it. However, as with all vaccines, 100% protection against chicken pox cannot be guaranteed.

### **How is the vaccine given**

VARIVAX is usually injected just under the skin (subcutaneously) of the upper arm.

A course of 2 vaccinations, at least 4 weeks apart, is indicated for Health Care Workers if they are found not to be immune on serology. A second dose should be given should be given 4 to 8 weeks after the first dose.

VARIVAX may be given at the same time as other vaccines.

### **Before you are given VARIVAX**

Anyone who has ever had a severe (life threatening) allergic reaction to a previous dose of VARIVAX vaccine should not get another dose. Anyone who has a severe (life threatening) allergy to any vaccine component should not get the vaccine.

VARIVAX vaccine components include:

- the active ingredient is a weakened form of the chicken pox virus.
- the inactive ingredients include sucrose, hydrolyzed gelatin, sodium chloride, monosodium L-glutamate, sodium phosphate dibasic, potassium phosphate monobasic, potassium chloride, residual components of MRC-5 cells including DNA and protein, sodium phosphate monobasic, EDTA, neomycin, fetal bovine serum.

### **What are the possible side effects of VARIVAX**

A vaccine, like any medicine, could possibly cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. The risk of VARIVAX causing serious harm, or death, is extremely low. Getting the VARIVAX vaccine is much safer than getting the disease.

Side effects following administration of Varivax are generally mild and well tolerated. Injection site reactions (pain, redness or swelling) are the most common side effects reported occurring in 7 to 30% of vaccine recipients, but are generally well tolerated.

A maculopapular or papulovesicular rash may develop after varicella vaccination (VV) (usually within 5 to 26 days). A VV-associated rash is likely to occur in less than 5% of vaccine recipients, and to last for less than 1 week.

As with all vaccines, there is a very small risk of a serious allergic reaction. Tell your doctor immediately or go to accident and emergency if you notice any of the following: wheezing or shortness of breath, swelling of the face, lips, mouth, throat or neck which may cause difficulty in swallowing or breathing, swelling of the hands, feet, or ankles, pinkish, itchy swellings on the skin, also called hives or nettle rash, skin rash, itchiness

If you have these, you may have had a serious allergic reaction to VARIVAX. You may need urgent medical attention. Most of these side effects occur within 15-30 minutes, or sometimes within a few hours of vaccination.

*If you feel anything that concerns you after your vaccination, contact your GP or Health Direct on 1800 022 222.*

Do not be alarmed by this list of possible side effects. You may not experience any of them.

### **After having VARIVAX**

It is recommended that you avoid coming into contact, for six weeks, with a person who falls into one of the following categories: people with a weakened immune system; pregnant women who have never had chickenpox; newborn babies whose mothers have never had chickenpox. There is a very low risk of you passing on the virus post vaccination.

Do not take aspirin or other salicylate medicines for six weeks after being given VARIVAX. A serious condition called Reye Syndrome has been reported following the use of aspirin or other salicylate medicines during a natural chickenpox infection.

### **Use of VARIVAX in pregnancy**

Varicella-containing vaccines such as VARIVAX are contraindicated in pregnant women. This is due to the theoretical risk of transmission of the varicella component of the vaccine to a susceptible foetus.

After you have had your first dose of VARIVAX, don't forget to follow-up with your second dose 4 weeks later to ensure you have protective immunity to varicella.

**As a precaution after your vaccination, it is recommended that you wait in the vicinity of the immunisation clinic for 15 minutes.**

If you have any other questions, you can discuss these with your nurse on the day of vaccination or contact Work Health Professionals on 9204 1999.