Varicella (Chicken Pox) Vaccine

This sheet talks about exposure to the varicella (chickenpox) vaccine in a pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Varicella, commonly called chickenpox, is a viral infection that usually happens in childhood. The most common symptom is a rash, which first appears as small, reddish spots or pimples. These spots will blister and then scab over. New spots appear for up to 3-5 days. Often a fever and body aches occur before the rash appears. Pneumonia also occurs in 10-15% of teenagers and adults who have chickenpox.

Chickenpox is very contagious, meaning it can spread easily from person to person. A person who has chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before they break out in a rash and continue to be contagious until all of their spots are scabbed over. If you have never had chickenpox before and someone in your household is infected, there is a 90% chance that you will catch it as well. The best way to prevent chickenpox infection is through vaccination. For more information, see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on chickenpox at: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/varicella/pdf/.

What is the varicella (chickenpox) vaccine?

The varicella vaccine is an injection that contains live varicella virus that has been made too weak to make you sick. It is given in two doses, with the second dose given at least one month after the first dose. The varicella vaccine causes your body to make antibodies to the virus that will protect you from getting the virus in the future.

I have never had chickenpox and just received the varicella vaccine. How long must I wait before becoming pregnant?

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices of the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that a woman wait one month after getting the varicella vaccine before becoming pregnant. There are reports of healthy babies born to women who became pregnant one month or sooner after getting the chickenpox vaccine.

I am pregnant. Can I be vaccinated against chickenpox with the varicella vaccine?

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices of the CDC does not recommend pregnant women get live virus vaccines due to theoretical concerns.

I am 6 weeks pregnant. I received the varicella vaccine last week. Will this hurt my baby?

In every pregnancy, a woman starts with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk.

The company who makes the vaccine had a registry of pregnant women who received the vaccine. At the close of the registry in 2013, there were pregnancy outcomes on 966 women who received the vaccine. Birth defects were not seen more often than what would be expected in the general population.

I am pregnant and have never had chickenpox. Is it okay for my child to get the chickenpox vaccine?

The American Academy of Pediatrics states that pregnancy in a mother or other household member is not felt to be a reason to avoid giving a child the vaccine.*
Some people get a rash after they get the vaccine. Only when this rash is present is there a chance to infect someone else. Children with weakened immune systems (e.g. from cancer therapy) can pass the virus on to others, who can then develop a mild case of chickenpox.

To date, no cases of chickenpox have occurred after exposure to healthy children who have received the varicella vaccine.

Can I get the varicella vaccine if I am breastfeeding?

The chickenpox virus has not been found in breast milk of women receiving the vaccine. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.*

What if the father of the baby gets the varicella vaccine?

There are no studies looking at possible risks to a pregnancy when the father has received the varicella vaccine. In general, exposures that fathers have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org fact-sheets/paternal-exposures pregnancy/pdf/*

* Section Updated May 2020

Please click here for references.