Vaccine for chickenpox? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have never had chicken pox. I know that it can be quite serious to get chicken pox as an adult. Is there a vaccine? Should I get vaccinated? I am worried because the entrance to my apartment building is a pediatrics office.

Thanks, Gweneth

Answer

Dear Gweneth,

Count yourself among the lucky: only about 5 to 15 percent of adults have never been infected by the highly contagious varicella virus, also known as chickenpox. Chickenpox infections among adults can be quite serious — adults are ten times more likely to be hospitalized for chickenpox than are children. Now for the good news — there is an effective vaccine. Since the varicella vaccine was introduced in the United States in 1995, there has been a 90 percent decrease in the incidence of infection. Though it benefits almost everyone, vaccination is specifically recommended for previously uninfected adults who are at high risk including healthcare providers, people with compromised immune systems, frequent travelers, and adults who are in close proximity to children on a regular basis. Because there is a pediatrics office in the entrance to your apartment building, you might want to make an appointment with your health care provider to discuss vaccination.
Here’s how it works: the vaccine is composed of a weakened varicella virus. Once the vaccine is injected into the body, an immune response that protects the individual from contracting the virus is enacted. For adults, the vaccine is administered in two doses, at least 28 days apart. The second dose is a relatively recent recommendation so those who have only received one dose of the vaccine may want to make an appointment to receive a second dose, even if years have passed since the first dose. The two dose vaccine is about 88 to 98 percent effective at preventing any varicella virus. After you receive the vaccine, you may experience a bit of tenderness in the area of the shot. A small number of people experience a low-grade fever, and even fewer may experience a rash around the injection site or on other parts of the body. Avoiding the use products containing aspirin for at least six weeks after receiving the vaccine is strongly recommended, as there is a link between aspirin and Reye’s syndrome [2] after chickenpox.

For some people, the vaccine is not recommended. The list of those who should not receive the vaccine include pregnant women, people with HIV/AIDS, individuals being treated with immunosuppressive drugs, cancer patients, and people who have had life-threatening allergic reactions to previous doses of the varicella vaccine or any component of the vaccine (including gelatin and neomycin). Those who’ve recently had a blood transfusion or been given other blood products will want to speak with their health care provider about when they can safely receive the vaccine following these procedures.
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