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Vaccine for chickenpox? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have never had chickenpox. I know that it can be quite serious to get chickenpox 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-zoster virus, which causes chickenpox. Chickenpox infections among adults can be quite serious — adults are much more likely to be hospitalized for chickenpox than children. While vaccinations are recommended for most people, it's especially pertinent to those who are more likely to be exposed to the virus and those who've never been infected. These individuals include health care providers, people with compromised immune systems, frequent travelers, and adults who are in close proximity to children on a regular basis. Given your proximity to a pediatric office, you may want to make an appointment with your health care provider to discuss whether you're a good candidate for the chickenpox vaccine. In the meantime, keep reading for a bit more information about the chickenpox virus and vaccine.

Chickenpox spreads through direct contact with the rash or when a person infected with chickenpox coughs or sneezes and the air droplets are inhaled. The risk for infection is higher among individuals who haven't had chickenpox or the vaccine — the good news is that the vaccine works well to prevent chickenpox from occurring in the first place. The vaccine is composed of a weakened varicella virus. For adults, it's administered in two doses about a month apart. For those who have already received one dose, it's recommended to get the second dose, even if years have passed since the first one. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services ^[2], the two-dose vaccine has been found to be 94 percent effective at preventing any varicella virus infection. After you receive the vaccine, you may experience a bit of tenderness in the area surrounding 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.

Another note about chickenpox and its vaccine is the risk for a different illness called shingles. Even after chickenpox has healed, the varicella-zoster virus stays in the body and may get reactivated later in life. Once reactivated, the virus resurfaces as shingles, causing painful clusters of blisters that can cause pain long after the blisters disappear. The viral reappearance is more likely in older adults and in people who have weakened immune systems (i.e., individuals undergoing chemotherapy or those living with human immunodeficiency virus, most commonly called HIV). Some more good news is that there are two zoster vaccines on the market for adults over the age of 50 to help prevent shingles. It's good to note that these vaccines may be administered regardless of previous infection or vaccination.

To learn even more about the varicella-zoster virus and available vaccines, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website on [Chickenpox vaccination](#) [3].

Alice!

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