

# SCHOOL HEALTH

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## CHICKENPOX

### It's More Serious Than You Think

Beginning a few years ago all new Kindergarten students are required to have the Chickenpox and Hepatitis A vaccines. Parents can sign the pink immunization card stating their child had the chickenpox disease (in lieu of the vaccine). I am often asked my thoughts about this new requirement.

Many adults remember the itchy spots of chickenpox (varicella) they had as children. They think that varicella is a mild illness and one that does not need to be prevented through vaccination. They wonder why children are not allowed to acquire natural infection. Even a few health care providers are not convinced.

But chickenpox can be dangerous and even deadly. Before the introduction of the varicella vaccine in 1995, approximately 4 million cases of the disease were reported annually, including 4,000 to 9,000 hospitalizations and 100 deaths. While varicella is the greatest vaccine-preventable killer of children in the United States, only 26 percent of children ages 19 to 35 months old had received varicella vaccine by 1997.

Ninety percent of all varicella cases and approximately 60 percent of hospitalizations and 40 percent of deaths due to varicella occur in children younger than age 10. Today, the greatest incidents of varicella has shifted to younger children (ages 1-4, rather than ages 5 to 9), probably because of earlier exposure in preschool and child care settings.

In the first 3 months of 1998, three fatal cases of varicella in children were reported. All three children

were unvaccinated. Failing to vaccinate young children for varicella is also a threat to adults who lack immunity. In 1997, three fatal cases of varicella in young adult women were reported. All three women had not been vaccinated for varicella and were infected by exposure to unvaccinated preschool-age children with the disease. Although fewer than 5 percent of cases of varicella occur in adults ages 20 and older, 55 percent of varicella-related deaths occur in this age group.

Studies have shown that the varicella vaccine is 85 percent effective in preventing disease. If a vaccinated person gets varicella, it is usually a very mild disease. It is recommended that children routinely be vaccinated between ages 12 to 18 months (make sure the first dose is AFTER the first birthday, or it will have to be repeated) and to provide "catch-up" vaccinations for older children, adolescents, and adults who have not been vaccinated or had the disease.

Even one death is too many. I don't think it is worth taking that chance with a precious child. Our children need protection from scarring, discomfort, and encephalitis (a deadly brain infection). I only wish the vaccine was available before my children had the disease. My 3 teenage daughters all have scars on their faces.



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