Varicella (Chickenpox)

The Disease

Varicella (Chickenpox) is a highly contagious acute viral disease caused by the Varicella virus. While it is generally a mild disease in children with a generalised vesicular rash and fever, complications can occur; these include secondary skin infections, pneumonia and encephalitis. Adults are at higher risk of more serious disease and complications. Reactivation of the virus in nerve endings in later life can result in infection with the Herpes zoster virus, commonly known as Shingles.

Where is it found?

Chickenpox is endemic in all countries.

Risk to travellers

For travellers, the risk of Chickenpox could be as high in developed countries as in developing ones. Few countries routinely use the vaccine, but coverage is increasing. Non-immune adults and children should consider vaccination, especially those planning extended stays or extensive travel.

Vaccination

Type

- Live, attenuated virus vaccine. (Should not be given to persons who are immune compromised, to pregnant women or those planning pregnancy. Pregnancy should be avoided for 28 days after vaccination.)

Standard schedule

- 1 dose for children under 14 years, routinely given at 18 months of age in combination with measles mumps and rubella, as part of the national immunisation schedule.
- A second dose is recommended to prevent break-through infections however is not part of the national immunisation schedule
- 2 doses 1-2 months apart for individuals over 14 years and adults

Level of protection

- Vaccine efficacy is estimated to be 90% against infection and 95% against severe infection.

Potential side effects

- Pain and swelling at site of infection in 7 to 30% of persons.
- Mild, chickenpox-like rash in 5% of recipients (usually fewer than 5 lesions) lasting less than 1 week.
- Fever in 10-15% of healthy children and adults.

As with all vaccines, there is a small risk of allergic reaction.
Travelvax will provide extensive advice on Varicella and other travel-related health risks during your pre-travel consultation. Call 1300 360 164 for the location of your nearest Travelvax clinic.