

Vaccine Information sheet for HealthCare Workers receiving Oka vaccination against chickenpox.

Since December 2003, the Department of Health has recommended that people who work in the health service and who do not have immunity to chickenpox should be offered a vaccine(the Oka vaccine) to protect them .

Why should you have the Oka vaccine?

1. For your own safety

Although chickenpox is generally a mild infection in children, it can be much more serious in adults. If you have not had chickenpox and a laboratory test shows that you do not have antibodies against chickenpox, you may be at risk of the infection. As a healthcare worker, you are also at risk of catching chickenpox from patients in the hospital. The virus spreads through the air, so even if you do not directly look after someone with chickenpox, or the related disease shingles, you may catch the infection

Why is chickenpox so bad?

Natural chickenpox occurring in an adult can cause severe pneumonia and infection of the brain. This happens over 100 times more commonly in healthy adults than in children, adults are at least 20 times more likely to die from chickenpox than children. People who smoke and pregnant women are at even higher risk from complications due to chickenpox. Chickenpox in pregnancy can also cause problems for the unborn foetus and newly born infant.

Is the vaccine any safer?

The Oka vaccine was developed in the 1970s and is widely used in the USA, Japan, Germany and other countries. The vaccine is much safer than having ordinary chickenpox. Complications have occurred in about 1 in 10,000 people vaccinated the USA. However, most of these people were treated very quickly and ALL recovered. Importantly NO ONE has died from the vaccine UNLIKE ordinary chickenpox, which results in 3000 adults being hospitalised and kills 25 (mostly adults) in the UK every year.

Are there any other benefits from the vaccine

About a quarter of people who have ordinary chickenpox will get shingles, a painful rash caused by the same virus, usually when they are older. People who have been vaccinated with the Oka vaccine are about 10 times less likely to develop shingles.

2. For the safety of others, including patients

Chickenpox is bad enough in healthy people. However, it can be even worse in patients whose resistance to infection is lowered. Having the vaccine will not only benefit you, but will prevent you inadvertently infecting your patients.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

About one person in 10 will develop a mild rash following the vaccine and a similar number will have a fever. About 2/3 of rashes are due, coincidentally, to ordinary chickenpox incubating at the time of vaccination.

If you do develop any symptoms please do the following:

- To reduce any fever, take paracetamol from the chemist (follow the instructions on the packet).
- Set in touch with your occupational health department at the earliest opportunity if you develop any symptoms.

They will take a swab of any rash to check whether it is ordinary chickenpox or vaccine rash, and report symptoms to the HPA/ vaccine manufacturer under their routine procedure. They will also advise if you need to be off work at all.

Very occasionally, people catch chickenpox for the second time. This also happens with ordinary chickenpox. In both cases, the second infection is mild and is not likely to cause complications.

Finally, people who receive the Oka vaccine are about 10 times less likely to get Shingles. If you do get shingles and have received the vaccine, please contact your Occupational Health Department for advice. They may want to take a sample to see if the shingles is due to the vaccine.

Why is the Oka vaccine not available for all adults who need it?

The vaccine is being made available to healthcare workers first because they are at higher risk of catching chickenpox. Studies are now going on to evaluate whether the vaccine can be offered to women of childbearing age and other adults who are at risk.

For further information about the Varicella vaccine please visit www.hpa.org.uk