Varicella Immune Globulin Information Sheet

What is varicella?
Varicella, also known as chickenpox, is an infection caused by a virus. The same virus also causes herpes zoster or shingles. Chickenpox occurs in Canada and throughout the world. Prior to the introduction of varicella vaccine, chickenpox was a common childhood disease.

How is chickenpox spread?
Chickenpox is spread through the air when someone with chickenpox coughs, sneezes or talks. It is very contagious and spreads easily from person to person. People can also become infected through contact with fluid from a varicella blister. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it on to her baby before birth.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?
Symptoms of chickenpox include:
- fever
- tiredness
- cold-like symptoms
- rash appearing on the body and face, then arms and legs. Rash develops over 3 to 4 days going from red spots to itchy fluid-filled blisters, then dry scabs.

The average child can develop 250 to 500 blisters. Complications of chickenpox include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain) and bacterial infections of the skin. Encephalitis can lead to convulsions, deafness or brain damage. Chickenpox can be more severe in infants, teenagers and adults than in younger children.

How can chickenpox be prevented?
Because chickenpox is spread through the air and is very contagious before the rash appears, it is difficult to avoid. People who have or think they have chickenpox should avoid public places for at least 5 days after the first blisters appear.

Once a person is exposed to chickenpox, varicella immune globulin may be given to help them fight off the disease or make the disease milder.

Chickenpox can be prevented by immunization. This vaccine is part of the routine immunization program for children in Alberta. The vaccine can prevent chickenpox disease completely or makes the illness very mild.

What is varicella immune globulin?
Varicella Immune Globulin (Varlg) is a sterilized blood product prepared from human blood plasma which contains concentrated amounts of varicella antibodies. Antibodies are substances created in the blood to fight infections. Varlg will give the person immediate protection, but this protection lasts only a short time. Varlg does not contain any preservatives.

Is varicella immune globulin safe?
Varicella immune globulin is among the safest blood products available. Canadian Blood Services carefully screens donors and tests all blood plasma collected. In addition, the product is treated with heat and chemical processes to eliminate any other germs in case they are missed during the screening process. Varlg does not contain any preservative.
Who should get varicella immune globulin?
Varicella immune globulin is given to people who have been in contact with chickenpox, but have not had chickenpox disease or varicella vaccine in the past, and are at an increased risk of severe chickenpox disease and its complications. This includes susceptible:

- pregnant women
- a newborn whose mother developed chickenpox shortly before birth or shortly after delivery
- certain immunocompromised individuals

Who should not have varicella immune globulin?
Varicella immune globulin should not be given to people who have:

- had chickenpox disease or vaccine in the past
- a history of severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to an immune globulin or any of its components
- had an unusually severe reaction to an immune globulin in the past
- any disorder that would contraindicate intramuscular injection (i.e., severe thrombocytopenia)
- an isolated IgA deficiency

People who have received live vaccines (for example measles, mumps, rubella or varicella containing vaccine) in the 14 days before receiving VarIg may need to have the vaccines repeated. People who receive VarIg should postpone receiving live vaccines for at least 5 months after receiving VarIg because VarIg may interfere with the development of antibodies to these specific live vaccines. Talk to your public health nurse or health care provider for more information.

What are the possible side effects to varicella immune globulin?
Most people have no reactions to VarIg. Reactions that do occur are typically mild. Possible reactions include:

- local pain and tenderness at the injection site
- headache, rash, tiredness, fever, and muscle and joint pain

As with any injection, unexpected or unusual side effects can occur. This includes severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

What should you do if you have a reaction to varicella immune globulin?

- apply a cool moist cloth where the needle was given to reduce the pain and swelling
- take a medication such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) to reduce the pain.
  - Aspirin® (ASA) is not recommended for individuals younger than 19 years of age.
- report any unusual reactions to Health Link Alberta

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call Health Link Alberta at:

- 403-943-5465 in Calgary
- 780-408-5465 in Edmonton
- Toll free 1-866-408-5465 elsewhere in Alberta

Or visit www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca for health information online.

This material is designed for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction and/or treatment. If you have specific questions please consult your doctor or appropriate healthcare professional.