

Pregnancy and chickenpox: Don't get the vaccine by mistake

The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine has helped save many lives for almost 10 years. However, it should **NEVER** be given to pregnant women. The chickenpox vaccine is called **Varivax**. **Varivax** contains a small amount of the actual chickenpox virus. Exposure to naturally occurring chickenpox virus during early pregnancy can cause birth defects in the baby and make the mother very sick. Birth defects occur in about 2% of babies born to mothers who become infected with chickenpox during weeks 13-20 of pregnancy.

When non-pregnant, healthy people are exposed to the chickenpox virus, they **CAN** get the vaccine, **Varivax**, to help protect them from getting sick. But if a pregnant woman is exposed to chickenpox, and has never had the disease or the vaccine, she should **ONLY** get **VZIG**, or **varicella immune globulin**. **VZIG** is not a vaccine. It will not prevent mothers and their babies from getting chickenpox. But it can lessen how sick

the mother gets if it's given within 4 days after contact with chickenpox virus.

It is not certain whether giving **Varivax** during pregnancy causes harm to the baby. So, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) follows cases in which pregnant women mistakenly receive **Varivax** just before or during pregnancy. As of 2003, there were 22 cases in which pregnant women should have gotten **VZIG** but got **Varivax** instead. Two women had miscarriages and one had a baby with serious birth defects.



Mistakes have happened because of the similar names of the two medicines: **varicella vaccine (Varivax)**, and **varicella immune globulin (VZIG)**. Both names contain the word varicella and start with the letter "V."

See **Check it out!** to protect yourself or a loved one from a serious mistake.

Check it out!

To protect against chickenpox and to avoid getting the vaccine if pregnant:

If you are NOT pregnant:

✓ **Get vaccinated while it's safe.** If you are a woman who has never had chickenpox, get immunized with **Varivax** while there's no chance of pregnancy. Your doctor should confirm this with a pregnancy test. After getting the vaccine, wait 3 months before getting pregnant to prevent the risk of birth defects.

✓ **Vaccinate children.** Make sure your children receive **Varivax**. This prevents spread of the virus to others, including pregnant women who have never had chickenpox or the vaccine.

If you ARE pregnant and have never received Varivax or had chickenpox:

✓ **Avoid the virus.** Stay away from anyone who has chickenpox, shingles, or has just received **Varivax**. Shingles are painful and itchy blisters, often on the back, caused by the same virus as chickenpox. Call your doctor right away if you've been in contact with someone with chickenpox or shingles.

✓ **Be part of the safety team.** If you need treatment for exposure to chickenpox, be sure you only get **VZIG (varicella immune globulin)**. Warn healthcare providers about the name mix-ups and to double check that you're getting **VZIG** not **Varivax**.

60 second safety tip

■ **Inspect before leaving.** A woman went to pick up her son's prescription for **Metadate ER (methylphenidate, extended release)**, which is used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The pharmacist had a hard time reading the prescription. He thought the doctor had prescribed **methadone**. This medicine is used for drug withdrawal, and also to lessen cancer pain. Fortunately, the woman looked at the bottle and read the leaflet attached to the bag. She couldn't understand why **methadone** would be prescribed for a boy with an attention deficit! By inspecting the prescription before leaving the pharmacy, she avoided giving her child a pain medicine meant for adults.

**Did you know...
Don't give children sedatives at home**

Some medical and dental procedures require people to remain still for a long time. This is almost impossible for young children. Medical procedures like certain x-rays, CT scans, or MRI tests can also be scary to children. To help, the doctor or dentist may prescribe a sedative for children before the procedure. These medicines are safely given in doses based on the child's age and weight. Enough medicine is given to help the child relax, but not to interfere with breathing. The most common medicines used for this purpose are **chloral hydrate** and **Versed (midazolam)**.



a pharmacy filled a prescription for **chloral hydrate** using a more concentrated syrup than the doctor intended. So there was a larger dose of medicine in each teaspoon. At home, the child received two times more medicine than he should have and stopped breathing. Another parent accidentally gave his child a very large overdose. A pharmacist misread a prescription for **chloral hydrate** and gave the parents a bottle containing 120 mL (4 ounces), not 12 mL (2½ teaspoons). The doctor had told the parents to give the child the whole bottle, so the child

received 120 mL of medicine (10 times more than prescribed). Like the other child, he stopped breathing. Both children died before reaching the hospital. Without emergency training and equipment, the parents were unable to save their children.

If your child needs a sedative before a procedure, tell your doctor that you will fill the prescription and bring it to the hospital or office so a medically trained person can give it. This also helps make sure the medicine is given right before the test or procedure, even if there are delays.

Sometimes doctors or dentists ask parents to give their children the sedative at home before coming to the hospital or office. This is not a safe practice! The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that only skilled medical personnel, like nurses or doctors, should give children these medicines after they arrive at the facility. Trained professionals will then be available to help, just in case the child unexpectedly has trouble breathing.

Sadly, a few children have died because they received too much of the sedative at home. In one case,

Double Trouble

Alzheimer's or diabetes? There are some medicines with names that could look like another medicine when handwritten on prescriptions. **Amaryl (glimepiride)** and **Reminyl (galantamine)** are good examples. **Amaryl** is a medicine used for diabetes. **Reminyl** is a medicine used to treat Alzheimer's disease. The names of these medicines may seem different, but when handwritten, they can look very similar. Both medicines can also be prescribed in a 4 mg dose, so mix-ups are possible.

Several months ago, two elderly women with Alzheimer's disease had to be hospitalized because their prescriptions for **Reminyl** had been filled with **Amaryl**. Many more people take **Amaryl** than **Reminyl**, so the pharmacists misread the handwritten prescriptions as the more familiar medicine - **Amaryl**. Both women had very low levels of sugar in their blood from taking **Amaryl** when they did not have diabetes. Luckily, they recovered with treatment.

The makers of **Reminyl** have agreed to change its name. But the process may take some time. Until then, look at the tablets in the bottle when you pick up your prescription to be sure they look as expected. As another safety check, ask questions like: "This medicine, **Amaryl**, is for my diabetes, right?" or "**Reminyl** is for my mother's Alzheimer's, right?"

Contact Information

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► Brand name medicines appear in green; generic medicines appear in red.