

Teen's death from chickenpox highlights need for vaccination, CDC reports

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Prior inoculation probably would have protected her, experts say.

(HealthDay)—The death from chickenpox of an otherwise healthy 15-year-old Ohio girl should remind parents of the importance of vaccination against the disease, U.S. health officials reported Thursday.

The teenager was admitted to the hospital with severe chickenpox, also known as varicella, and died three weeks later because of serious complications, according to a case study provided by the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

"Varicella can be deadly, even in seemingly normal individuals," said Dr. Kenneth Bromberg, director of the [Vaccine](#) Research Center and chairman of pediatrics at the Brooklyn Hospital Center in New York City.

"It is likely that [death](#) would have been prevented with prior vaccination," he said.

Chickenpox, which is highly contagious, is usually a [mild illness](#) characterized by an uncomfortable, itchy rash. But it sometimes leads to serious illness and death, as this 2009 case demonstrated.

Infants, adults and people with [weakened immune systems](#) are at increased risk for severe chickenpox, but most chickenpox-related hospitalizations and deaths occurred among healthy people younger than 20 before the chickenpox vaccine was introduced in 1995, the CDC report said.

"One of the reasons for death is bacterial superinfection of [skin lesions](#) with *Streptococcus pyogenes* [group A strep]," said Bromberg. "The other is disseminated viral infection, which seems to have happened in this case."

The teenager had no underlying conditions that might have raised the odds for severe chickenpox, according to the report.

The article, published in the April 12 issue of the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, noted that the chickenpox vaccine is safe and more than 95 percent effective at preventing severe illness and death.

Since the vaccine became available, the number of chickenpox cases, hospitalizations and deaths in the United States has decreased substantially.

The 15-year-old's death demonstrates the importance of routine chickenpox vaccination, as well as catch-up vaccination of older children and teens to prevent chickenpox and its complications later in life when the disease may be more severe, the authors added.

Before chickenpox vaccination was included in routine childhood immunization, the disease caused about 11,000 hospitalizations and 100 to 150 deaths in the United States each year. The two dose-vaccine has led to declines of more than 95 percent in chickenpox-related illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths among people who have received routine vaccinations.

The CDC recommends children get the first dose of chickenpox vaccine at age 12 to 15 months and the second dose at age 4 to 6 years. Children, teens and adults who have not had a second dose—and have not had [chickenpox](#)—should get the catch-up vaccine.

Experts say adult vaccination is critical.

"The varicella vaccine is especially important for healthcare professionals, child care workers, teachers, residents and staff in nursing homes and people who care for or are around others with weakened immune systems," said Dr. Roya Samuels, a pediatrician at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park, N.Y.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [chickenpox](#).

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