

Unprotected People #31 Varicella (Chickenpox)

Michigan child's death caused by chickenpox

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Though fatal outcomes are rare, chickenpox (varicella) can result in death. The Michigan health care community was reminded of that sobering fact this spring with the report of an eight-year-old boy's varicella-related death. The child, who had not been vaccinated against chickenpox, died from complications of invasive group A streptococcal (GAS) infection approximately one week after the onset of varicella rash.

Varicella has increasingly become recognized as a risk factor for GAS disease. An investigation of an outbreak of GAS in a Boston day care center in 1997 found antecedent or concurrent varicella infection to be a significant risk factor for GAS infection.

Investigations of several other varicella-related deaths have similarly noted severe, invasive group A strep infection as a possible complication of chickenpox.

This is the fourth reported varicella-related death in Michigan since 1997. Two deaths were reported in that year, a two-year-old child and a 42-year-old adult. An eight-year-old child died in 1998. None had previously received chickenpox vaccine, which was licensed for use in the U.S. in 1995. Nationally, it is estimated that approximately 100 varicella-related deaths occur each year.

As part of a comprehensive effort to assess the impact of vaccination on varicella-related morbidity and mortality, CDC now encourages state public health agencies to investigate varicella-related deaths. . . . Health care providers should report varicella-related deaths immediately to the local health department of the patient's residence.