



UK NSC recommendation on screening for varicella susceptibility

Following a review of the evidence against strict criteria, the UK NSC does not currently recommend introducing a national screening programme for antenatal screening for varicella susceptibility.

Varicella zoster virus (VZV) is the virus that causes chickenpox. In the UK chickenpox mostly occurs in children less than 10 years of age, causing a mild infection. In the UK approximately 90% of women of childbearing age are protected (immune or have immunity) against chickenpox. This is because infection in childhood produces immunity from infection in later life.

Chickenpox acquired for the first time during pregnancy can result in serious maternal illness. It can also adversely affect the fetus and the risk of this happening depends upon the point at which maternal infection is acquired. This remains very rare.

Susceptible women who come into contact with chickenpox can be treated with an injection of varicella immune globulin (VZIG) within 10 days of contact with the infection. This temporarily boosts the immune system, helps reduce the severity of the infection and is thought to reduce the risk of harm to the baby.

Screening has been suggested as a way of providing women with information on whether they are susceptible to chickenpox. It has been suggested that this would improve the timeliness of prescribing VZIG.

Key findings supporting the UK NSC recommendation

- there is very little data on susceptibility to chickenpox in the UK or on the number of susceptible women who come into contact with the virus during pregnancy
- current tests have not been evaluated for use in a screening programme
- there was no research looking at whether a screening programme improved the delivery of VZIG, so there is uncertainty on whether a screening programme would be of benefit

The UK NSC regularly reviews its recommendations on screening for different conditions in the light of new research evidence becoming available. To find out more about the UK NSC's antenatal screening for varicella susceptibility recommendation, please visit:

<http://legacy.screening.nhs.uk/varicella>

The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) advises ministers and the NHS in the 4 UK countries about all aspects of screening and supports implementation of screening programmes.

Find out more about the UK National Screening Committee at www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-national-screening-committee-uk-nsc. The UK NSC evidence review process is described at www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nsc-evidence-review-process and a list of all UK NSC recommendations can be found at legacy.screening.nhs.uk/recommendations

The UK NSC secretariat is hosted by Public Health England (www.gov.uk/phe).