

FOR RELEASE #06-238
December 5, 2006

NEW VACCINATION PROGRAM FOR INFANTS BEGINS IN JANUARY

WHITEHORSE – Health and Social Services Minister Brad Cathers today announced that, beginning next month, varicella (chickenpox) vaccine will be available for all Yukon infants when they reach their first birthday.

"Although chickenpox has been generally accepted as a relatively mild infection that is just part of childhood, it can occasionally lead to serious complications," Cathers said. "By adding varicella vaccine to the regular immunization program we are helping to prevent this common childhood illness."

About 95 per cent of Canadian children have had chickenpox by the age of 15 years, but it can be acquired later in life and becomes increasingly severe with age. Varicella, or chickenpox, is an illness caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). The virus remains dormant in our bodies following chickenpox and can be reactivated years later as herpes zoster, a painful illness commonly known as shingles.

Varicella vaccine will be offered to children at the same time as the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.

Yukon Medical Health Officer Dr. Bryce Larke said the introduction of a varicella vaccine program is timely.

"Chickenpox often leads to parents losing several days from work when required to stay home to care for a sick child. The illness usually means only a few days of fever and discomfort but VZV infection can sometimes lead to serious problems, particularly in persons whose immune systems are weakened by other medical conditions. Childhood immunization programs play an increasingly important role in the health care of Yukon children," Larke said.

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