An intradermal skin test for determination of immunity to varicella

E Somekh, Y Bujanover, G Tal, I Dalal, A Tanay, D Lehman

Abstract
Aims—To evaluate the usefulness of a diluted, inactivated solution of attenuated varicella vaccine in predicting susceptibility to varicella and its correlation with specific antibody titre to varicella.

Methods—In a prospective blinded study, 63 healthy subjects (aged 2–43 years) were studied. Skin test solution was prepared from vials of OKA strain virus which was inactivated by exposure of the vials to room temperature for 10 days; solution was diluted at 1/50 with normal saline and kept at 4°C until used for skin testing. The material was injected intradermally. Serum samples were drawn prior to skin testing and kept at −70°C until analysis for antibody assay by the indirect fluorescent antibody (IFA) method.

Results—Forty three patients were IFA antibody positive; 41 of them reacted to the skin test. One of the 20 IFA negative patients reacted to the skin test. Sixteen patients had two serological tests performed, one month apart. Four out of these 16 patients tested negative with the skin test. All four had negative serology on both samples. Six of the 12 IFA positive patients showed a boost in the antibody titre one month after application of the skin test. The specificity and sensitivity of the skin test compared to the IFA assay were both 95%, and the positive and negative predictive values were 97% and 90% respectively.

Conclusions—Results suggest that a varicella skin test prepared using this simple and relatively cheap method is a safe, sensitive, and specific tool by which to assess immunity to varicella.

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Keywords: skin test; varicella; immunity; serology

In 1977, Kamiya et al reported the use of an intradermal varicella skin test in healthy children. Since then, a number of investigators have evaluated its use as a diagnostic tool, and as a measure of the immune response to varicella zoster virus (VZV) in both healthy and immunocompromised hosts.

Several studies have shown that the intradermal skin test has been an effective means by which to evaluate immunity to varicella. The skin test generally used has been prepared from supernatant of VZV (OKA strain) infected MRC-5 cells, in a process which included centrifugation and heating. Another method was the usage of purified VZV glycoproteins as gB, gE:gI, and gH:gL.

These preparations were proved to be safe and reliable; however, they are not widely available and are mainly used in research institutes. Thus, most physicians in Israel as well as in many other countries have used the antibody response as the single laboratory test to determine the susceptibility to varicella when the history is questionable.

In order to simplify the procedure of skin testing for varicella, we prepared an inactivated preparation of the varicella vaccine.

In this study, we evaluated the usefulness of a diluted, inactivated solution of attenuated varicella vaccine in predicting susceptibility to varicella and its correlation with specific antibody titre to varicella.

Methods
Sixty three healthy patients (26 females, 37 males; aged 2–42 years), constituted the study population (mean age 4.6 (SD 9.2) years). Pregnant women were excluded from the study. Patients or their caregivers recorded the history of varicella and signed a consent form to participate in the study. The study was approved by The Ethics Committee of the Edith Wolfson Medical Center.

All skin tests used the Mantoux technique with tuberculin syringes and 25 gauge needles. Material was applied in the usual manner by injecting 0.1 ml intradermally into the volar surface of the forearm. A sterile solution of normal saline, injected in the same manner at a different site, was used as control skin test. Tests were considered positive when the diameter of erythema and induration was 5 mm or larger, and the control site was less than 5 mm, at 48 hours, using the ballpoint pen technique. Skin tests was evaluated on a blinded basis (the evaluator did not know the immune status of the patient when reading the test).

Skin test solution was prepared from vials of OKA strain varicella vaccine (Pasteur Merieux, Lyon, France) containing, according to the manufacturer’s information, at least 2000 plaque forming units/0.5 ml vial. Vials were left at room temperature for 10 days. Exposure for such a time period has been shown to be sufficient to destroy the labile viable virus. Samples from the vial were cultured in MRC-5 cells.

When no virus was grown in the tissue culture, the solution was diluted at 1/50 using 4.5 ml vials with 20 mm closure, containing 0.9% sterile saline and 0.4% phenol as preservative.

(Center Laboratories, Port Washington, New York). The vials were kept at 4°C for up to one month until used for skin testing.
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Discussion
The cell mediated immune response plays a
major part in protection from VZV infection.10
Since skin test reactivity is an indirect assess-
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skin testing may be an efficient and reliable tool
in determination of susceptibility to VZV, as
shown in studies using fluid from VZV infected
cells.1  However, in spite of the fact that skin
testing does not require diagnostic laboratory
facilities and staff, most physicians throughout
the world still prefer the more sophisticated
antibody assay as the tool of choice in the
assessment of immunity to varicella.
In this study we evaluated a simple method
for preparing varicella skin test and examined
the skin test safety and efficacy. The skin test
used by us was well tolerated and side effects
were minimal. Skin testing did not induce
seroconversion in the four seronegative pa-
tients as in previous reports,11  suggesting that
skin tests do not obscure interpretation of
serology following exposures. Shiralki et al
showed, in a guinea pig model, that only large
amounts of skin test antigen given repeatedly
could provoke a primary immune response.11
In contrast, six of 12 IFA positive patients had
booster responses following application of skin
test antigen, as previously reported by LaRussa
and colleagues.2  These immunological re-

ciation of immunity to varicella.

SAFETY
Skin test application was uneventful; except for
local erythema and induration, there were no
other local or systemic manifestations. No
patient with negative history for varicella
developed chickenpox within two months from
skin testing.

EFFICACY
Forty three patients were IFA antibody posi-
tive, of which 41 reacted to skin test. One of the
20 IFA negative patients (aged 10 years)
reacted to the skin test.
Thirty seven patients had a positive history
for varicella. All had a significant antibody titre
to VZV as tested in our assay, while six of the
26 patients with negative history for chicken-
pox had significant antibody titre to VZV.
Sixteen patients had two serological samples
obtained one month apart and analysed simul-
taneously. Four of these 16 patients tested
negative with the skin test. All four had
negative serology on both samples. Six of the
12 IFA positive patients had a booster response
(fourfold or greater rise in titre of antibody)
one month after application of the skin test.

We believe that skin testing may add another
tool for assessing immunity to varicella in
circumstances where antibody testing is not
readily available or when the serological results
are equivocal. However, although serology can
be performed within a few hours, the results
may not be available to the physician, even after
the 48 hours from presentation at the physi-
cian’s clinic that a skin test takes to perform.
Skin testing may be also useful for screening
purposes, for example before vaccination when
the varicella status of a person is unknown.
Although skin testing may be considered a
relatively invasive procedure, in our group of
patients the test was not accompanied by
significant inconvenience or pain, and was well
tolerated.

Safety of the skin testing procedure was
assessed by several criteria. Firstly, safety was
assured by the lack of viable attenuated virus in
the solution. Secondly, no patient with a nega-
tive history for varicella developed varicella or
varicella like illness within two months of skin
testing. Finally, all four seronegative patients
who had serology testing one month after the
test, did not seroconvert following the test.
Another precaution was not to administer the
test to immunocompromised patients or to any
person in whom a live varicella vaccination was
otherwise contraindicated.

It should be emphasised that if this skin test
were to be used in practice, testing should be
performed only in clinics experienced with intradermal testing (as with tuberculin testing), and capable of obtaining, using, and manipulating the vaccine. Furthermore, such use falls outside the indications and methods of administration for which the vaccine is licensed.

In future, it might be informative to study the use of this skin test in immunocompromised patients and pregnant women, groups in which it might be useful. Previous reports have suggested that varicella skin test reactivity may be impaired in the immunosuppressed host. However, since cell mediated immunity is crucial in the host defense during varicella infection, skin test reactivity may be a more accurate measurement of immunity to this infection than antibody titre.

Another practical use of this skin test may be the addition of another antigen to test delayed type hypersensitivity in patients with positive past history of varicella infection, as part of investigations for immunodeficiency. We believe that if these results are reproduced in larger studies, this test may prove to be an accessible clinical tool when facing a varicella dilemma.

Part of this work was presented at the 37th Annual Meeting of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, 18–21 November, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1999 (Abstract no. 717).


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