

Chickenpox (Varicella) Virus

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a contagious illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is a common disease among kids.

The infection usually begins with a fever and flu-like symptoms. It is followed by an itchy, red rash, with spots that look like blisters. Blisters can appear all over the body and last 3-4 days, until they scabbed over.

The infection is contagious for five (5) days before the first spots appear, and five (5) days after the onset of the rash.

There is no cure for chickenpox and it is possible to get the illness more than once. Prevention is your best protection.

Children with mild illness can return to school as soon as they are well enough to take part in all activities.

Some cases are very mild with few spots and may not be aware they had chickenpox. Adults and very young infants may have complications, such as skin infections, pneumonia, or encephalitis.

Most people get chickenpox as a child and develop life-long protection to it.

Chickenpox and shingles

The varicella virus may lie dormant in the body for many years after the chickenpox infection. If the virus becomes active late in life, it may cause a painful rash known as 'shingles'. Since the same virus causes both chickenpox and shingles, a person who has never had chickenpox may get the chickenpox from being exposed to someone with shingles.

How is chickenpox spread?

The virus is very contagious and spread by coughing and sneezing, and by direct contact with the skin lesions. It takes 14-21 days for symptoms to occur.

Preventing chickenpox

There is a vaccine to prevent chickenpox.

Vaccination in adult females must be completed at least one (1) month before becoming pregnant.

There is a cost to adults for the vaccine. Older children and adults should test for immunity before getting the vaccine.

The vaccine may be effective in preventing chickenpox if given within 72 hours of exposure to a chickenpox case. Call your healthcare provider or public health unit.

Contact Community Health Services to discuss your child's vaccine schedule. Space between the two doses is done on a case-by-case basis.

Chickenpox and pregnancy

Infections within the first three (3) months of pregnancy may harm the baby. If a pregnant mother is exposed to chickenpox, talk with a health care provider immediately.

Treating chickenpox

Control the fever, but do **NOT** use aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid, A.S.A.) or any products that contain aspirin if a child gets chickenpox. Aspirin increases the risk of severe illness in children with chickenpox and other viral infections that can damage the liver and brain. **It is safe** to use acetaminophen (Tylenol, Tempra, and others) to control fever.

Encourage good personal hygiene in the child with chickenpox because sores can easily become infected by bacteria, and cause secondary bacterial infections.

Signs of bacterial infection may include:

- redness
- swelling
- area is warm to touch
- discharge, greenish in colour



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