

Chickenpox

(Varicella Zoster)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious, acute and generalized disease caused by the varicella virus, a member of the herpes virus family.

Who gets chickenpox?

Almost everyone gets chickenpox. It usually occurs at 2 to 8 years of age. Epidemics are seen in three or four year cycles, mainly from January through May.

Recommendations:

- **DO NOT use aspirin.**
- Keep child home from school until all lesions are crusted, usually seven days.
- Keep nails trimmed. Put gloves on child if scratching is a problem.
- Encourage fluids.
- If genital lesions cause pain when peeing, encourage child to pee in bath water.
- May use Aveeno baths for itching: mix one cup Aveeno with two cups cold water. Shake until mixed, then pour in tub of warm water.
- Call physician immediately if child develops cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, high fever, stiff neck, headache, listlessness or hyperirritability.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is highly contagious. Chickenpox is transmitted to others by direct person-to-person contact, by droplet or airborne spread of discharges or secretions from an infected person's nose and mouth or indirectly through articles freshly soiled by discharges or secretions from the infected person's lesions. The scabs themselves are not considered infectious.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Initial symptoms include sudden onset of slight fever and feeling tired and weak. These are soon followed by an itchy, blister-like rash. The blisters eventually dry, crust over and form scabs. The blisters tend to be more common on covered parts of the body than on exposed parts. They may appear on the scalp, armpits and trunk, as well as on the eyelids and in the mouth. Mild or inapparent infections occasionally occur in children. The disease is usually more serious in adults than in children.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms commonly appear 14 to 16 days after exposure, with a range of 11 to 21 days after exposure.

When and for how long is a person able to spread chickenpox?

A person is usually able to transmit chickenpox from one to two days before the onset of the rash through the first four to five days or until lesions have formed crust. Contagiousness may be prolonged in people with lowered resistance.

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Does past infection with chickenpox make a person immune?

People usually have chickenpox only once and it generally results in lifelong immunity. However, this infection may remain hidden and recur years later as herpes zoster (shingles) in a proportion of older adults and sometimes in children.

What are the complications associated with chickenpox?

Reye's syndrome has been a potentially serious complication associated with chickenpox. For this reason, children with chickenpox should not be treated with aspirin, which may increase the risk of Reye's Syndrome. Newborn children (less than one month old) whose mothers are not immune and patients with leukemia may suffer severe, prolonged or fatal chickenpox.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

IV acyclovir or vidarabine is effective in treating chickenpox, but generally is not used for uncomplicated cases.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of chickenpox?

The best method to prevent further spread of chickenpox is for people infected with the disease to remain home and avoid exposing others who are susceptible. Infected people should remain home until five to seven days after the skin eruption began or until the lesions become dry and should avoid contact with pregnant women and newborns. Patients with weakened immune systems who have been exposed to chickenpox should contact their physicians immediately. A vaccine to prevent chickenpox is available through your private physician or local health department.

Report cases of chickenpox to your local health department.

