

Chickenpox (Varicella) Facts

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also called varicella, is a disease caused by a virus that can easily spread to others.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

A rash is often the first sign of chickenpox in children. Adults may feel tired and have a fever 1 to 2 days before getting a rash. The rash appears as red or discolored raised spots that turn into itchy, fluid-filled blisters. Fluid may drain from the blisters before they dry and scab over. Not all cases of chickenpox will have blisters. Some cases may only have a mild rash that does not turn into blisters.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads very easily by touching chickenpox blisters or through the air when someone with chickenpox coughs or sneezes. The virus does not live long on surfaces.

The period between when someone is exposed to the chickenpox virus and when a person might develop chickenpox symptoms is usually about 2 weeks, but it can range from 10 to 21 days.

People can also get chickenpox when exposed to someone who has a rash from shingles (zoster).

Who should get a chickenpox vaccine?

Vaccination, or getting a shot, is the best way to protect against chickenpox. Children, adolescents, and adults should have two doses of chickenpox vaccine.

- Children should get their first dose at 12 to 15 months old and the second at 4 to 6 years old.
- Children who have not had all their chickenpox vaccines can still catch up. Children 12 years and younger should receive a total of two doses given at least 3 months apart.
- Because of higher risk of health problems, all people 13 years and older who have never had chickenpox or been vaccinated should get two doses 4 to 8 weeks apart.
- Chickenpox vaccine should not be given during pregnancy.

Most vaccinated people will not get chickenpox. If a vaccinated person does get chickenpox, it is usually mild, with few blisters, and low or no fever. The chickenpox vaccine prevents almost all cases of severe disease.

Isn't chickenpox a mild disease?

For most healthy people, chickenpox will not result in serious complications. However, the disease can cause serious health problems in adults, infants, and teens, as well as those who are pregnant or have a weakened immune system. These complications may include:

- Skin and soft tissue infections (like staph or strep infections)
- Dehydration
- Pneumonia
- Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis)
- Risk to unborn babies

People with a weak immune system or pregnant people are at highest risk for getting very sick from chickenpox. If they are exposed to the chickenpox virus, they should contact their health care provider right away.

Is there a treatment for chickenpox?

Calamine lotion and oatmeal baths (such as Aveeno, etc.) may help relieve the itching. Keeping the nails clean and short may help to prevent skin infections from scratching.

Aspirin or aspirin containing products should not be used to relieve fever in children. Non-aspirin medications, such as acetaminophen (commonly known as Tylenol®), are recommended.

In addition to those who are pregnant and those with a weakened immune system, anyone 13 years and older who develops chickenpox should also contact their health care provider to find out if there are other appropriate treatments.

When is someone with chickenpox contagious?

A person can spread chickenpox to others 1 to 2 days before the rash appears until all blisters are dry and have a scab. It takes about 4 to 7 days after the rash starts for blisters to dry.

People who were vaccinated and still develop chickenpox tend to have fewer spots and the spots may not contain any fluid. A person with these type of spots are contagious until spots have faded, and no new spots have developed within a 24-hour period.

Children with chickenpox should be kept home from school or child care until they are no longer contagious, as described above.

What can be done to prevent the spread of chickenpox?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent the spread of chickenpox. In addition, avoiding close contact with others who are sick, washing your hands often, and staying home if you are sick can help prevent the spread of chickenpox.

If a person has been exposed to chickenpox but has never had the vaccine or had chickenpox, sometimes the chickenpox vaccine can also help prevent chickenpox after a person has been exposed.

How is someone diagnosed with chickenpox?

In the past, chickenpox was a common disease and was usually diagnosed by a health care provider based on symptoms. However, chickenpox is now less common, and is often difficult to differentiate between other rash illnesses, such as hand, foot, and mouth disease. It is recommended that all suspected chickenpox cases be confirmed by laboratory testing. The recommended laboratory test is called PCR and can be done by swabbing a lesion or testing a scab.

How do I protect my child if there is a chickenpox outbreak?

During a chickenpox outbreak, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) recommends vaccination for children who have not received two chickenpox shots or have not had chickenpox.

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