

FACTS ABOUT

Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a very common infection in childhood. It is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, which only infects people. It is most common in children and is usually mild. When adults get it, however, they can be very sick. Most adults have already had chickenpox and will not get it again. Chickenpox is also very dangerous for people with immune system problems like leukemia, or for people who are taking steroids.

Chickenpox begins with a fever, followed in a day or two by a rash that can be very itchy. The rash starts with red spots that soon turn into fluid-filled blisters. New blisters may form during the next few days, and after a few days, crusts form over the blisters.

The chickenpox virus spreads very easily through the air or through direct contact with the fluid in a chickenpox blister. Chickenpox is infectious until the last blister has crusted or five days after the rash first appears, whichever is shorter. The only way to stop the spread of the virus from person to person is to prevent infected people from sharing the same room or house, which is not very practical.

Shingles (zoster) looks like chickenpox and is caused by the same virus but is found on only one part of the body. Shingles occurs in people who have already had chickenpox and is very infectious. It is possible to catch chickenpox from someone with shingles but someone cannot get shingles from someone with chickenpox.

Things Parents Can Do

◆ Watch your child for signs of chickenpox during the next 2 to 3 weeks if another child has it. If your child develops chickenpox, make sure you tell the staff, and contact your physician if you have any questions.

◆ If your child gets chickenpox, **do not give aspirin [acetylsalicylic acid (ASA)] or any products that contain aspirin.** Taking aspirin increases the risk of getting Reye's syndrome. This severe illness can damage the liver and brain. If you want to control your child's fever, it is safe to use acetaminophen (Tylenol™, Tempra™, Panadol™ and others).

◆ If one of your children has chickenpox,

do not try to keep your other children in separate places in the house. It is usually impossible to prevent chickenpox from spreading to other members of the family. If someone else catches the infection, it will appear 2 to 3 weeks after the first family member got it.

If any child in your household has an immune system disorder, contact your physician. The physician can give that person a special type of immune globulin containing a large number of antibodies (protective substances in the blood) to help prevent infection.

◆ Adults, and pregnant women in particular, can develop severe chickenpox. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox, or if you have not lived in the same house with someone who has had chickenpox or shingles,

CHICKENPOX

(Varicella)

Information From Your Health Care Provider



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A very contagious disease caused by the herpes zoster virus. Symptoms are usually mild in children and may be more severe in adults. Chickenpox can affect all ages, but is most common in children.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Fever.
- Abdominal pain or a general ill feeling that lasts 1 to 2 days.
- Skin eruptions that appear almost anywhere on the body, including the scalp, penis, and inside the mouth, nose, throat, or vagina. They may be scattered over large areas, and they occur least on the arms and legs. Blisters collapse within 24 hours and form scabs. New crops of blisters erupt every 3 to 4 days.
- Adults have other symptoms that resemble influenza.

CAUSES

- Infection with the herpes zoster virus. It is spread from person to person by airborne droplets or contact with a skin eruption on an infected person. Symptoms may appear 7 to 21 days after exposure.
- A newborn is protected for several months from chickenpox if the mother had the disease before or during pregnancy. The immunity diminishes in 4 to 12 months.

RISK INCREASES WITH

Weak immune system due to illness or drugs.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Varicella vaccine for healthy children 12 months or older.
- An immune globulin may be used for high-risk persons, such as those who take anticancer or immunosuppressive drugs if they become exposed to the virus.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Children usually recover in 7 to 10 days. Adults may take longer. Adults and persons with weak immune systems are more at risk for complications.
- After recovery, a person has lifelong immunity against a recurrence of chickenpox.
- After chickenpox runs its course, the virus sometimes remains dormant in the body (probably in the roots of nerves near the spinal cord). The same virus may cause shingles many years later.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Bacterial infection of chickenpox blisters. Scarring, if blisters become infected (rare).
- Pneumonia.
- Central nervous system complications (rare).
- Shingles many years later in adulthood (possibly).



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider can diagnose chickenpox by the appearance of the skin eruptions. Medical tests are usually not needed.
- Treatment is directed toward relieving symptoms. Drug therapy may be prescribed for some patients.
- Use cool-water soaks or cool-water compresses to reduce itching.
- Keep the patient as quiet and cool as possible. Heat and sweat trigger itching.
- Keep the nails short to discourage scratching, which can lead to secondary infection.

MEDICATIONS

- To decrease itching: Topical anesthetics and topical antihistamines provide quick, short-term relief. Preparations containing lidocaine and pramoxine are least likely to cause allergic skin reactions. Lotions that contain phenol, menthol, and camphor (such as calamine lotion) may be recommended. Follow package instructions.
- To reduce fever, use acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Never use aspirin, as it may contribute to the development of Reye's syndrome (a form of encephalitis) when given to children during a viral illness.
- An antiviral drug may be prescribed in some cases.

ACTIVITY

- Bed rest is not needed. Allow quiet activity in a cool environment. A child may play outdoors in the shade during nice weather.
- Keep an ill child away from others, and from school, until all blisters have crusted and no new ones occur.

DIET

Blisters in the mouth may make eating and drinking painful. Fluid intake is needed to prevent dehydration. Try Popsicles, cool drinks, and bland foods.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or your child has symptoms of chickenpox.
- Cough, headache, or sensitivity to bright light develop, fever rises or blisters appear infected.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page