

Chickenpox (Varicella)

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.

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.

Once someone comes in contact with the virus, it usually takes about 2 weeks for chickenpox to appear, but it can range from 10 to 21 days.

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 didn't get the vaccine 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, teens, pregnant women, or others with weakened immune systems. These complications may include:

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

People with a weak immune system and pregnant women 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 Aveeno (oatmeal) baths may help relieve some of the itching. Keeping the nails clean and short may help to prevent 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 pregnant women 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. A person can spread the virus until all spots are dry and have a scab. It takes about 4 to 7 days after the rash starts for spots to dry.

People who were vaccinated and still develop chickenpox have fewer spots and the spots rarely contain fluid. They can spread chickenpox until spots have faded and no new spots have developed within a 24-hour period.

How long should children with chickenpox stay home from school or child care?

Children with chickenpox need to stay home until all blisters are dry and have a scab.

Vaccinated children with chickenpox may not develop fluid-filled blisters. In this situation, they should stay home until spots have faded and no new spots have developed within a 24-hour period.

What can be done to prevent the spread of chickenpox?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent the spread of chickenpox. In addition, avoid close contact with others who are sick, wash hands often, and stay at home if sick.

How is someone diagnosed with chickenpox?

In the past, chickenpox was a common disease and was most often 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 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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