



Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chicken pox?

Chickenpox is an acute and highly contagious viral infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is sometimes called varicella.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The first symptoms generally develop between 2 to 3 weeks, with the average being 14 to 16 days, after the person is exposed.

Chickenpox begins with fever, fatigue and loss of appetite followed by a generalised rash a day or so later. The rash is more concentrated over the trunk, face and scalp and starts as itchy red spots but rapidly progresses to blisters. The blisters last 3 to 4 days before turning into scabs and drying out. Several crops of blisters will appear over a period of days, resulting in various stages of development present on the body at any one time.

In children it is usually a mild illness of short duration with complete recovery. A common side effect of chickenpox is a secondary bacterial skin infection due to scratching of the itchy rash. Adults, adolescents and people with weakened immune systems are at risk of developing more serious disease and potentially life-threatening complications. Pregnant women and newborn babies are at increased risk if they are exposed to chickenpox.

Healthy adults and children generally recover within 10 days.

How is it spread?

Chickenpox is very easily spread from one person to another when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat or contact with the fluid in the blisters.

People with chickenpox should cover their mouth and nose when sneezing and coughing, dispose of used tissues immediately, wash their hands carefully and not share eating utensils, food or drinking cups. Hands should be washed thoroughly with blisters or soiled articles.

What is the infectious period? Should a person with chicken pox be isolated?

A person is infectious from 1-2 days prior to onset of the rash until the blisters have all crusted into scabs, usually about 5 days after they appear.

A person with chickenpox should be excluded from school, childcare or work for at least five days after the rash first appears AND until all the blisters have scabbed over.

What type of treatment and care should be given?

There is no specific treatment for chickenpox infection but there are several things that can be done to help relieve the symptoms. Rest and fluids are encouraged. The risk of skin infection from scratching can be reduced by the use of over the counter anti-itch soaps and lotions and by keeping fingernails short.

Non-aspirin medications, such as acetaminophen, can be used to reduce fever. Aspirin must not be given to young children and adolescents due to

the risk of developing Reyes Syndrome, a severe condition associated with aspirin use for viral infections.

How can chicken pox be prevented?

Chickenpox vaccine is very safe and effective at preventing the disease. Most people who get the vaccine will not get chickenpox. If a vaccinated person does get chickenpox, it is usually mild—with fewer blisters and mild or no fever. The chickenpox vaccine prevents almost all cases of severe disease.

If you or your child has not been vaccinated against the varicella-zoster virus, contact your physician or visit the Child Health Immunization Clinic located at the Hamilton Health Centre, 67 Victoria Street, Hamilton, to be immunized as soon as possible.

What is re-activated chickenpox or shingles?

After you have had chickenpox, the virus can lie dormant in the body and may 'reactivate' many years later as shingles. Shingles can only occur in people who have had chickenpox (and very rarely in those who have been immunised).

Shingles, also known as Herpes Zoster, is characterised by a painful blistering rash, usually only on one side or area of the body. The symptoms can persist for 2-4 weeks. The virus can spread to other people through direct contact with the blisters and can cause chickenpox in a non-immune person. Covering lesions with a dressing may help to reduce the risk of passing on the infection to others.

Adapted from:
"Chickenpox". ACT Government Health Directorate, 2014 (<http://www.health.act.gov.au/publications/fact-sheets/chickenpox/>, accessed 20 August 2014)