

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 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?

Most healthy people recover from chickenpox and don't have severe symptoms. However, the disease can cause serious health problems, such as:

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

Who is at highest risk for getting very sick?

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.

People 13 years and older should 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 still 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 the chickenpox 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 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. In some outbreak situations, MDH may also recommend that children who have not been vaccinated stay home from school or child care.

For more information, contact:
Minnesota Department of Health
Vaccine-Preventable Disease Section
www.health.state.mn.us/immunize
651-201-5414 or 1-800-676-5414