

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an acute contagious viral disease, especially of children. Chickenpox is caused by a virus in the herpes family and is the same virus that causes Shingles.

Who can get it?

Chickenpox is very contagious. People of all ages can get chickenpox. Most people have had the disease by the time they are adults. Once a person has had the disease, it is very rare that they would get it again. It is still possible for vaccinated people to catch and spread it.

What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?

Symptoms can range from very mild to severe.

- High fever
- Tiredness
- Crops of a red pimple like rash (usually beginning around the head and neck).
- Within a few hours, the rash changes to water-filled blisters called vesicles, then pus-filled blisters which form a scab three to four days later.
- The rash spreads throughout the body and can occur on mucous membranes, such as the mouth, throat and eye.
- The rash can have several stages (rash, blister, scab) present at the same time and is very itchy.
- Vaccinated people may have very mild symptoms such as no fever and as few as 10-15 blisters.
- Loss of appetite
- Headaches

How long after exposure do symptoms begin?

Usually the first symptoms begin within two to three weeks after being exposed. The disease occurs most frequently in winter and early spring.

How is it spread?

The virus is spread by:

- Breathing in the virus from moisture droplets put into the air from someone with Chickenpox who has coughed or sneezed.
- Coming in direct contact with the fluid in the blisters of a person with Chickenpox.
- Coming in direct contact with objects freshly soiled by the fluid.

How long is a person contagious?

Chickenpox is contagious usually one to two days before the rash appears and continues until all the blisters have formed a scab.

Are there complications?

- Most people recover without any problems. However, in severe cases, the liver, brain and kidney can be damaged, especially in people with immune problems.
- Pneumonia can occur.
- Death can occur, especially among newborns and people with Leukemia and/or other immune problems.
- Bacterial infections can occur from scratching the rash.
- Shingles may occur many years later in people who have had Chickenpox.

Is there a treatment?

- People who would most likely get severe complications, such as those with immune problems, may be treated with antiviral drugs.
- A doctor may suggest lotions, special bath preparations and medications to relieve the itching.
- Keeping the nails short can help prevent infecting the rash through scratching.
- Use a non-aspirin product for fever or discomfort only as needed (aspirin has been linked to Reye's syndrome as a complication to Chickenpox and other viral diseases).

How can Chickenpox be prevented?

- Chickenpox can be prevented by vaccine and it is effective at preventing chickenpox.
- Chickenpox (varicella) vaccine is a 2 dose series for all persons 1 year of age or older without evidence of immunity.
- Children should be vaccinated routinely at age 12-15 months with their first dose and between 4-6 years with the second dose
- Adults receive two doses 4-8 weeks apart.
- Pregnant women should be checked for evidence of immunity. Women who do not have evidence of immunity should receive the first dose of vaccine upon completion of pregnancy and before discharge from the hospital. The second dose should be given 4-8 weeks after the first dose.
- Avoid being near people with Chickenpox until all the blisters have formed a scab.
- Exclude children from school or child care for at least five days after the first appearance of the rash and the entire rash has formed scabs.

For more information on Chickenpox, call (816) 325-7204

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