



## FACT SHEET: CHICKENPOX (varicella)

**Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). It is most common in children. It causes a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness, and fever.**

### SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Signs and symptoms of chickenpox may include:

- Fever, headache and feeling tired before a rash develops
- Small, red, flat spots usually first appearing on stomach, back, face, and scalp and then spreading to the rest of the body
- Spots develop into itchy, fluid-filled blisters. May be few blisters to as many as 500.
- Blisters break and form scabs or crust over in 4 to 5 days

Symptoms usually occur 10 to 21 days (about 2 weeks) after contact with a person infected with chickenpox.

### HOW IS CHICKENPOX SPREAD

Chickenpox is spread from person-to-person through the air when someone with chickenpox coughs or sneezes. You can also get chickenpox if you touch a blister or the liquid from a blister. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it on

to her unborn baby before birth. Mothers with chickenpox can also give it to their newborn baby after birth.

### HOW LONG ARE PEOPLE CONTAGIOUS?

Chickenpox is very contagious. It spreads easily from person-to-person. A person with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1 to 2 days before they get the rash until all their chickenpox blisters/lesions have crusted (scabbed), which is usually 5-7 days after the blisters appear.

### CAN YOU GET CHICKENPOX MORE THAN ONCE?

After you have had chickenpox, you are not likely to get it again. In rare cases, a person might get it again.

However, the virus stays in your body long after you get over the illness. If the virus becomes active again, it can cause a painful rash called shingles or zoster.

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## WHO IS AT RISK FOR HEALTH COMPLICATIONS?

Complications from chickenpox can occur, but they are not common in healthy people who get the disease. People at risk for severe disease and complications include:

- Infants less than 1 year of age
- Adolescents greater than 12 years of age
- Adults
- Pregnant women
- People with weak immune systems (e.g., people with HIV/AIDS, cancer or transplant recipients; people on chemotherapy, immunosuppressive medications, long-term steroid use)

## WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE HEALTH COMPLICATIONS?

Complications from chickenpox can include:

- Bacterial skin infections and/or necrotizing fasciitis ('flesh-eating disease')
- Pneumonia (infection of the lung)
- Encephalitis (infection or inflammation of the brain)
- Bleeding problems
- Infection of other sites (e.g., blood)

## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM EXPOSED TO CHICKENPOX?

Call your health care provider if you are exposed to chickenpox and you:

- Have never had chickenpox disease and are not vaccinated with the chickenpox vaccine
- Are pregnant
- Have a weak immune system due to disease or medication
- Are at risk of serious complications (see "Who Is At Risk for Complications")

## HOW IS CHICKENPOX TREATED?

Most healthy children and adults need only home treatment for chickenpox. Home treatment includes resting and taking over-the-counter medications to reduce fever and itching. Do not use aspirin or aspirin-containing products to relieve fever from chickenpox. If you want to control your child's fever, use acetaminophen.

For people with a high risk of complications, your health care provider may prescribe medications to shorten the length of illness. If complications do develop, your health care provider will determine the appropriate treatment.

Please speak with your health care provider about treatment options, as not all treatments are suitable for children.

## CAN CHICKENPOX BE PREVENTED?

The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine is the best way to prevent chickenpox.

Two doses should be given. The first dose is given at 15 months and the second with the 4-6 year booster.

If your child is not vaccinated and is exposed to chickenpox, contact your healthcare provider, as he or she may still be protected if they are vaccinated right away.

Chickenpox vaccine should not be used in pregnancy.

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### CAN MY CHILD WITH CHICKENPOX GO TO CHILD CARE OR SCHOOL?

Children can return to school or child care if they feel well enough to participate in all activities even if they still have a rash.

### HOW IS SHINGLES RELATED TO CHICKENPOX?

Shingles is a painful skin rash caused by the same virus as chickenpox. The rash usually occurs on only one part of the body, where it causes pain. Shingles can happen in people who have already had chickenpox but usually many years later since after having chickenpox, the virus stays in the body in an inactive form.

People cannot get shingles from someone who has chickenpox or shingles. People **CAN** develop **chickenpox** if they have never had chickenpox and they touch the fluid from the blisters of someone with shingles.

### CHICKENPOX AND PREGNANCY

Women who have never had chickenpox can develop severe illness if they get chickenpox while pregnant. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox, call your health care provider right away if you are exposed to chickenpox.

Chickenpox can affect the developing baby if the mother becomes infected in the first half of her pregnancy. A newborn baby can develop severe chickenpox if the mother has the infection around the time of delivery.

### REFERENCES

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