

FACTS ABOUT CHICKENPOX

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a very contagious illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Even healthy children and adults can become seriously ill from chickenpox.

Complications may include bacterial infection of the skin, worsened asthma or other serious infections of the lungs (pneumonia), blood (septicemia) or brain (encephalitis).

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

A mild fever develops about 10 – 21 days (commonly 15 days) after exposure to chickenpox. Then in 2 or 3 days, a blister-like rash starts on the trunk and face.

Eventually, a person may be covered with 250 to 500 itchy blisters, forming scabs in about 5 days.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person by direct contact with the blisters and occasionally through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash appears and until the blisters have turned to scabs. Scabs from chickenpox lesions are not infections. A person with shingles may also spread chickenpox through direct contact with others.

Who is at risk from chickenpox?

Anyone who has not previously had chickenpox or did not receive the varicella vaccine can get chickenpox. Monitor exposed children for 3 weeks following exposure for symptoms. Adults usually get very ill, though a person of any age can develop complications from chickenpox. The developing fetus is at risk, especially during early pregnancy. Anyone who is pregnant or has a weakened immune system and has been exposed to someone with chickenpox should consult his/her health care provider.

How is chickenpox diagnosed?

A health care provider can identify chickenpox through a physical exam and history of exposure. Be sure to notify the health care provider before going to a clinic so they can prevent exposure to others. A blood test can determine if a person has developed immunity to chickenpox, even if there is no history of disease.

How is chickenpox treated?

General comfort measures are all that are needed for most cases of chickenpox. Keeping fingernails short and clean can help avoid infection from scratching. Warm baths with baking soda (1/2 cup to a tub of water) can temporarily help with itching. Fever reducing medication, such as acetaminophen, may be given if the child has a fever. **DO NOT GIVE ASPIRIN TO A CHILD WITH FEVER**, as this has been associated with Reye Syndrome. If a lesion or blister becomes red, swollen, develops pus in it, or a high fever occurs, consult a health care provider immediately.

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How can chickenpox infection be prevented?

Chickenpox can be prevented through vaccination.

Exclude from group setting?

Children with chickenpox need to be excluded from child care or school until all the blisters have formed scabs.

Handwashing

Handwashing is one of the primary ways to stop the spread of disease. The following steps are recommended for good handwashing:

1. Turn on warm water.
2. Apply soap to hands.
3. Rub soap over tops and palms of hands and around fingernails. Scrub hands for approximately 20 seconds.
4. Rinse hands with running water.
5. Dry hands with a clean, disposable towel.
6. Repeat the process if preparing foods.

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