

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus called varicella zoster. It causes an itchy rash with small, fluid-filled blisters. For most people, getting chickenpox once provides immunity for life. However, some people can get chickenpox more than once, although this is not common.

How is chickenpox spread?

The virus is spread by direct contact with the blisters or by breathing in droplets that get into the air after infected people breathe, talk, cough or sneeze. A person with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears until all their chickenpox blisters have formed scabs (usually 5-7 days).

What are the signs and symptoms of chickenpox?

A very itchy, blister-like rash appears 10 to 21 days after exposure and infection with the virus. The blisters usually appear first on the face, chest, and back then spread to the rest of the body, including inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area. It usually takes about one week for all the blisters to become scabs. Healthy children may have 200-500 lesions (blisters) in 2 to 4 successive crops.

Other typical symptoms that may begin to appear 1-2 days before rash include:

- fever up to 102°F
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- headache

Who is most at risk?

Chickenpox can be serious, especially in babies, adults, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems or serious medical conditions.

What type of health problems are caused by chickenpox?

- Bacterial infections of the skin and soft tissues in children
- Pneumonia
- Infection or inflammation of the brain
- Bleeding problems
- Blood stream infections (sepsis)
- Dehydration

After a chickenpox infection, some of the varicella-zoster virus may remain in your nerve cells and cause a condition called shingles – a painful band of short-lived blisters. Shingles can reactivate and resurface many years later. The virus is more likely to reappear in older adults and people with weakened immune systems.

Shingles can lead to its own complication — a condition in which the pain of shingles persists long after the blisters disappear. This is called postherpetic neuralgia, and can be severe.

How is chickenpox diagnosed?

A healthcare provider can usually diagnose chickenpox by examining the blisters or rash and noting any symptoms. Sometimes, a blood test or other laboratory tests may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis.

How is chickenpox treated?

The disease is usually mild in children and does not require hospitalization or medical treatment. Persons at higher risk may develop serious complications and require prompt medical attention.

Contact your healthcare provider if any of these complications occur:

- The rash spreads to one or both eyes.
- The rash gets very red, warm or tender, indicating a possible secondary bacterial skin infection.
- The rash is accompanied by dizziness, disorientation, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, tremors, loss of muscle coordination, worsening cough, vomiting, stiff neck or a fever higher than 102°F (38.9°C).
- Anyone in the household has a weakened immune system or is younger than 6 months of age.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe an antiviral medication called acyclovir that can reduce the symptoms of chickenpox. It works best when it is given within 24 hours after the disease begins. This medicine is most often prescribed for teenagers and for children with asthma or a skin condition called eczema.

There are several things that can be done at home to help relieve the symptoms and prevent skin infections. Calamine lotion and colloidal oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching. Keeping fingernails

trimmed short may help prevent skin infections caused by scratching blisters.

Use non-aspirin medications, such as acetaminophen, to relieve fever.

Do not use aspirin or aspirin-containing products to relieve fever from chickenpox. The use of aspirin in children with chickenpox has been associated with Reye's syndrome, a severe disease that affects the liver and brain and can cause death.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine is the best way to prevent chickenpox. The vaccine provides complete protection from the virus for nearly 98% of people who receive both of the recommended doses. When the vaccine doesn't provide complete protection, it significantly lessens the severity of the disease.

The chickenpox vaccine is recommended for:

- Young children – one dose between the ages of 12-15 months of age and the second dose between 4 and 6 years of age
- Unvaccinated older children
- Unvaccinated adults who never had chickenpox and are at high risk of exposure.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)

Rev. 04/2018

