

quick facts

About... Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease that is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Although it is commonly associated with children, anyone who has not had chickenpox can become infected. Chickenpox is usually considered a mild childhood rash illness, but it can cause serious complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis, bacterial infections, and even death.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Early symptoms of chickenpox begin 10-21 days after exposure and include fever, tiredness, and weakness. These symptoms are followed by the appearance of flat, red spots which commonly occur first on the back and chest and continue to appear for 2 to 3 days. The spots become raised and fill with fluid, resembling blisters, and may severely itch. The fever may increase when the itchy, blister-like rash appears. Approximately five days after the rash first appears, the blisters rupture and scab over.

Some people who have had only one dose of chickenpox vaccine can still get chickenpox. When this happens, the disease is often milder with fewer spots (less than 50) that may look more like insect bites than chickenpox blisters.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is easily spread from person to person by droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Direct contact with the rash of an infected person during the contagious period can also spread the disease. Having contact with personal articles, such as clothing or bedding, from a person recently infected with chickenpox may also spread the disease.

A person with chickenpox is considered contagious from 2 days before the rash appears until the rash has scabbed over.

Who is at risk for chickenpox?

Anyone who has not received two doses of chickenpox vaccine can get chickenpox. Infants under one year of age and persons over fifteen years of age are at greater risk for complications associated with chickenpox than otherwise healthy children. People with weakened immune systems also are at greater risk for severe illness and complications.

Chickenpox in pregnant women five days before through two days after delivery can result in severe and sometimes fatal illness in the infant.

How do I know if I have chickenpox?

See your health care provider if you have been exposed to someone diagnosed with chickenpox or if you have symptoms of chickenpox. Your health care provider may collect blood or swab samples to test for chickenpox, but chickenpox can often be diagnosed based on the symptoms you experience. If you have ever had chickenpox or have received two doses of chickenpox vaccine, it is unlikely that you can get chickenpox. Many other organisms can cause rash illnesses than can resemble chickenpox.

How can chickenpox be treated?

Since chickenpox is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not effective. Currently, there are no antiviral medications regularly used to treat chickenpox. Treatment focuses on relieving the symptoms of the illness. Oral acyclovir may be recommended for some individuals at increased risk of moderate to severe. Over the counter medications or lotions may be used for itching. Fingernails should be trimmed to prevent infection from scratching, and bedding should be changed frequently to help prevent skin infections.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

There is a safe, effective vaccine available to prevent chickenpox. If you have not had chickenpox, and/or have no record of having varicella vaccine, talk to your health care provider to decide if you should receive the vaccine. Most schools and licensed child care providers require proof of vaccination or immunity to chickenpox before entry. Two doses of chickenpox vaccine provide the best protection against chickenpox.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/varicella/in-short-adult.htm>.

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