



Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a viral infection that causes a red, itchy rash on the skin that resembles tiny blisters. It is mostly seen in children, but anyone who has not had the chickenpox can still get the disease.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

The beginning symptoms of chickenpox include a fever and feeling tired or weak. These symptoms are followed by an itchy blister-like rash. The blisters will eventually dry up and scab over about five days after the beginning of the rash. The rash usually starts on the face, stomach, chest, or back, and spreads to other parts of the body. Chickenpox symptoms begin about 10 to 21 days after exposure and last until the rash scabs over (about five days after the onset of the rash).

What are the complications of chickenpox?

Chickenpox is usually a mild disease and not life threatening in otherwise healthy children, but can be serious in newborn babies, adults, and other persons who have a weakened immune system (such as HIV, cancer, or organ transplant patients). These persons have a higher risk for complications such as severe skin infections, scars, pneumonia, brain damage, and even death. Reye's syndrome has been a potentially serious complication associated with chickenpox involving those children who have been treated with aspirin.

How is chickenpox spread?

The virus that causes chickenpox lives in the nose and throat and is sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. The virus also lives in the blisters and the rash. Chickenpox is spread person-to-person by coughing, sneezing, or touching the rash.

How long can you spread chickenpox to others?

People with chickenpox can spread the disease from one to two days before symptoms start until all the lesions are crusted over (about five days). However, people with weak immune systems are contagious longer, usually as long as new blisters keep appearing. If you have the chickenpox, stay away from others until the blisters are dry and crusted. If a person vaccinated for chickenpox gets the disease, they can still spread it to others.

If I or my child have chickenpox, when can we return to work, school, or daycare?

Persons with chickenpox must stay out of school, daycare, or work until all blisters have dried and crusted over.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

Most cases of chickenpox do not need medical treatment. Using calamine lotion, drinking plenty of fluids, and taking non-aspirin medications (such as acetaminophen) for fever and pain can help relieve some of the symptoms. Do not give a child aspirin or aspirin-containing products, which can cause Reye's syndrome in children with viral infections. In some cases your healthcare provider may prescribe an antiviral to treat chickenpox. Call your healthcare provider if you have any questions about treatment of chickenpox.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

The best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. The chickenpox vaccine is recommended for all children, adolescents, and adults who have not had chickenpox. The chickenpox vaccine is very safe and good at preventing the disease. Sometimes people who have been vaccinated will still get chickenpox. If vaccinated people do get chickenpox, it is usually mild.

Can a person get chickenpox more than once?

Yes, but it is uncommon. Chickenpox usually results in lifelong immunity. However, sometimes the infection remains hidden and can reoccur years later as shingles.