

Chickenpox (Varicella Zoster)

What is Chickenpox (Varicella Zoster)?

Chickenpox is a disease caused by a germ called varicella zoster virus. It causes an itchy, blister-like rash as well as fatigue and fever.

The disease spreads easily. This means chickenpox is contagious. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash appears and until the blisters have scabs (about 4 to 7 days).

After contact with someone who has chickenpox, it takes between 10 to 21 days to develop symptoms.

Children who get chickenpox are usually ill for 5 to 10 days. Infected people should stay home from work, school or daycare until the blister-like sores are scabbed over or have faded.

There is a vaccine that can prevent chickenpox.

Who can Get Chickenpox?

Anyone can get chickenpox. People who have been vaccinated can still develop a breakthrough chickenpox rash.

How is Chickenpox Spread?

The virus is easily spread by:

- breathing air that contains the virus (from an infected person's sneezing or coughing)
- touching an infected person's chickenpox sores.

What are the Symptoms?

- aching, fever or a sore throat (first symptoms)
- itchy, blister-like rash that may affect your entire body. The blisters will dry up, crust over and become scabs.
- dehydration or loss of appetite (not hungry)
- headache.

What is Breakthrough Chickenpox Rash?

Sometimes people who got the chickenpox vaccine still get chickenpox.

The symptoms are usually milder but can still be spread (contagious).

Symptoms include:

- few or no blisters, or just red, raised spots
- mild or no fever
- shorter length of illness.



A breakthrough chickenpox does not have fluid-filled blisters. Photo: CDC (cdc.gov/chickenpox/hcp/index.html).

Since there are often no fluid-filled blisters, people who have breakthrough chickenpox can go to work, school or daycare when the red spots have faded and no new spots have appeared for 24 hours.

What are the Possible Problems of Chickenpox?

- Chickenpox can cause severe problems (complications) for:
 - adults
 - people with weak immune systems from illness or medicines (such as long-term steroids)
 - pregnant people
 - infants.
- Problems include:
 - bacterial infections
 - lung infection (pneumonia)
 - brain infection (encephalitis)
 - bleeding or bloodstream infection.

Important: If you are caring for a child who has chickenpox, do not give them aspirin. This can cause a serious condition (Reye's syndrome) that can cause death.

How is Chickenpox Found?

Your health care provider will look at your symptoms. They may test for chickenpox by swabbing or scraping the rash or taking a blood test.

How is Chickenpox Treated?

To treat chickenpox at home:

- Children who are healthy overall are treated with bed rest, liquids and fever control.
- Keep fingernails trimmed short to avoid scratching the blisters.
- Take baths in oatmeal to help relieve itching.
- Put calamine lotion on the blisters to relieve itching.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol®) for discomfort.



Chickenpox can cause severe problems (complications) for, among others, adults and pregnant people.

There is an antiviral medicine you can take if you are at risk for serious problems:

- people with a chronic (long-lasting) skin or lung diseases
- pregnant people
- people with weakened immune systems
- people older than 12 years of age.

The medicine works best if it is taken within 24 hours of breaking out in a rash. Call your health care provider.

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

- are pregnant
- have a weakened immune system
- are caring for an infant (less than 1 years old) who has been exposed to chickenpox.



A chickenpox vaccine is available for children and adults. Talk with your health care provider to learn more.

How can Chickenpox be Prevented?

Talk with your health care about the chickenpox vaccine.

- Children younger than 13 years old should get two doses:
 - first dose between 12 and 15 months old
 - second dose between 4 and 6 years old.
- People 13 years of age or older who have never had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine should get two doses at least 28 days apart.

Anyone who receives the vaccine should not take aspirin for 6 weeks after the vaccine.

If you are exposed to chickenpox and can't receive the vaccine (due to pregnancy or a weakened immune system), you can get a medicine (VariZIG™) to prevent chickenpox or make it less severe. This is best given as soon as possible within 10 days of exposure. Call your health care provider to learn more.

Can You Get Chickenpox More Than Once?

Getting chickenpox once usually means you cannot get it again. You are immune for life.

But the virus that causes chickenpox stays in your body and can come out later as shingles.

More common after the age of 50, shingles causes numbness, itching, severe pain and a blister-like rash. Pain can last for years after the rash heals.

People who have not had chickenpox can get it from having contact with fluid from the blister-like rash on a person who has shingles. Because you get shingles from your own chickenpox virus in your body, you cannot pass shingles to anyone else.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.