

Facts about Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is usually a mild illness in children. Infection in teenagers, adults and people with weakened immune systems can be more serious.

Complications from chickenpox include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain), and bacterial infections of the skin from scratching. Encephalitis can lead to convulsions, deafness, or brain damage. About 1 in every 3,000 adults with chickenpox will die from the infection. Chickenpox can cause birth defects if the mother gets chickenpox while she is pregnant, and these can be fatal.

Is there a vaccine?

Yes, the chickenpox vaccine provides protection against chickenpox. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #44b Chickenpox \(Varicella\) vaccine](#).

How is chickenpox spread?

The virus is spread through the air by an infected person sneezing or coughing. It can also be spread through contact with the fluid from chickenpox blisters, or the saliva of a person who has chickenpox. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it to her baby before birth.

People with chickenpox can spread the virus to others from up to 5 days before and 5 days after the rash appears. They are most contagious from the day before and for the first few days after the rash appears.

To reduce the spread of chickenpox, children with the illness should not attend daycare or school until 5 days after the rash first appears or the blisters have crusted.

It usually takes 2 to 3 weeks for a person to get sick after exposure to the virus. If your child is exposed to chickenpox, watch for signs of the illness for the next 2 to 3 weeks.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of chickenpox may include fever, aches, tiredness, headache and loss of appetite. A few days later, a rash appears. Red spots appear first on the face and scalp, and then spread quickly down the body and to the arms and legs. The spots become very itchy and begin to look like blisters, filled with clear fluid. After another few days, the fluid becomes cloudy, the blisters break, and a crust or scab forms while the skin heals. During this time, new "crops" of spots appear, form blisters, and then crust over. Chickenpox usually lasts about 10 days.

What is the treatment?

If you have been exposed to the chickenpox virus, your treatment will depend on your age, personal health, and severity of the illness. Most healthy children will only need to stay at home and rest.

Pregnant women, newborn infants, and people with weakened immune systems who have not been vaccinated or have not had chickenpox or shingles in the past should see a health care provider immediately if they are exposed to, or get, chickenpox.

Prevention methods must be started as soon as possible to reduce the illness, and the risk for complications.

Prevention methods may include antiviral medication, an injection of varicella zoster immune globulin or the varicella vaccine.

What is the home treatment?

In most cases, chickenpox is a mild illness. If you have chickenpox, you should rest but you do not need to stay in bed.

The most helpful things you can do are those that make you or your child feel more comfortable. Some steps you can take are to:

- Drink lots of liquids such as water, juice and soup, especially if there is a fever. If your baby is breastfeeding, feed your baby more often.
- Keep fingernails short and clean, and cover hands with gloves or socks at night to prevent scratching.
- Keep the skin cool to relieve itching. Dress lightly and avoid hot baths and showers. Ask your pharmacist or health care provider about lotions that can reduce the itching.
- Prevent the spread of infection by using a household cleaner to wash any clothing or other items soiled with fluid from chickenpox blisters. Keep the infected person away from other family members who have not had chickenpox.

Acetaminophen or Tylenol® can be given for fever or soreness. ASA or Aspirin® should NOT be given to anyone under 20 years of age due to the risk of Reye Syndrome.

For more information on Reye Syndrome, see [HealthLinkBC File #84 Reye syndrome](#).

What is shingles?

The same virus that causes chickenpox causes shingles. For some people who have had chickenpox, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash with blisters called shingles.

Symptoms of shingles include headache, fever, nausea and chills. People may feel itching, tingling, or extreme pain in the area where a rash develops several days later. It takes 2 to 4 weeks for the blisters to heal, although some scars may remain.

A person with shingles who feels well does not need to stay away from work or other activities, as long as the rash can be completely covered. Shingles can not be passed from person to person. However, a person who has not had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine can get chickenpox from someone with shingles. This is uncommon and requires direct contact with the fluid from the shingles blisters.

For more information about shingles, see [HealthLinkBC File #111 Shingles vaccine](#).