

Chickenpox



What Is It?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by a varicella zoster virus. Most children in the United States experience chickenpox before they are school-aged. A vaccine against chickenpox is now available. Although chickenpox is not a serious disease for most children, those whose immune systems are impaired (e.g., newborns and persons who are on chemotherapy for cancer, have AIDS, or take steroids like cortisone) may experience severe disease, or even death. Chickenpox can also cause more severe health problems in pregnant women, causing stillbirths or birth defects, and can be spread to their babies during childbirth.

What Are the Symptoms?

Chickenpox usually begins with a mild fever and an itchy rash. The rash appears with small red bumps on the stomach or back and spreads to the face and limbs. These bumps rapidly become blistered and oozy, then crust over. People may have only a few bumps or may be totally covered. Once a person has been infected with the virus and gets chickenpox, the virus remains (without symptoms) in the body's nerve cells. In some people, the virus becomes active again at a later time and is called "shingles" or "zoster." With shingles a red, painful, itchy, blistering rash appears, usually in a line along one side of the body. There is no fever. The virus shed in the blisters of the rash can cause chickenpox in a person who has not had it, if that person has direct contact with the infected shingles blisters.

Who Gets It and How?

Anyone who is exposed to the varicella zoster virus and has not had chickenpox before will almost certainly get it. If you had chickenpox once, it is extremely rare to get it again. Chickenpox is most common in young children, whereas shingles are most common in adults. The disease is spread by close contact (sharing breathing space or direct touching contact) with infected discharge from the nose, throat or rash. It takes about 10 to 21 days from the time of exposure until a person develops the symptoms of chickenpox.

Persons with chickenpox are contagious from two days before the rash appears until the last blister has developed crusts (about five days).

When Should People with this Illness Be Excluded?

Children/staff with chickenpox should be excluded for six days after the rash first appears or until all blisters are crusted over and dry.

Persons who receive the chickenpox vaccine can come down with a mild case of the disease, and are also contagious. Follow these exclusion guidelines:

- Children with shingles shed the virus that causes chickenpox and could cause an outbreak of chickenpox in the facility. Therefore, unless the shingles rash can be completely covered, it is advisable that persons with shingles stay home until the rash is crusted over and dries. The person with shingles must be very careful about personal hygiene.
- Be sure to inform parents of children with impaired immune systems when another child has received chickenpox vaccine.

Where Do I Report It?

Notify parents and staff about occurrences of chickenpox, especially pregnant staff and parents who may be vulnerable. Also notify your health consultant. You do not need to report cases of shingles or chickenpox to the local health department.

How to Limit the Spread of Chickenpox?

- Assure that all children and vulnerable staff are immunized.
- Don't expose newborns, pregnant women or people with immune problems.
- Temporarily exclude the sick child or adult.
- Wipe noses with clean tissues, dispose of them properly and wash your hands.
- Don't share food, bottles or toothbrushes.
- Don't kiss children on the mouth.
- Open windows and maximize outdoor play.
- Develop a system for immediate notification if someone develops chickenpox or shingles.
- Keep a person with chickenpox (or shingles with a rash that cannot be completely covered) at home until the rash is completely dry and crusted.
- Watch closely for early symptoms in others for three weeks following the most recent case. If a child or staff member develops a suspicious rash, he/she should call his/her health care provider so the rash can be diagnosed.