

Chickenpox- Factsheet

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a contagious disease caused by a virus called *Varicella-zoster*.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms usually occur about two weeks after exposure. Initial symptoms include sudden onset of fever and feeling tired and weak. Soon after, an itchy rash will appear on the body, with spots (lesions) changing in stages from flat red spots to raised bumps to fluid-filled blisters, and eventually to dried, crusted scabs. New spots continue to appear for about 3 or 4 days. The spots will dry up and scab over before falling off, and do not usually leave a scar. Usually this disease is more serious in adults than in children.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is easily spread from person-to-person by airborne droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person. Contact with the fluid from the lesions, either by direct contact or touching items that have been freshly soiled by fluid from the lesions, can also spread the disease. If a person who is pregnant gets chickenpox, the baby can also get it while in the womb.

How long are people contagious?

A person is contagious beginning 1 to 2 days before the rash appears, and until all lesions are dry and crusted over (which takes an average of 5 days). Some people, especially if they have been vaccinated before, can have very mild cases of chickenpox, and may not get the type of rash that blisters and crusts over. In those cases, people should stay home until at least 24 hours have passed with no new lesions appearing.

Who gets chickenpox?

Anyone can get chickenpox, but those who are not vaccinated are at greater risk of becoming infected and having more severe disease. Chickenpox usually results in lifelong immunity. However, the virus can stay hidden in the cells of your nervous system and come back years later as shingles.

What treatment is available for people with chickenpox?

In healthy children, chickenpox is usually a mild disease. The itch and discomfort can be relieved with oatmeal baths or calamine lotion. In persons with weakened immune systems, pregnant people, and unvaccinated older teens or adults, the disease can be more severe. These people should contact their doctor right away if they become sick with chickenpox, because they may need antiviral medicine to keep it from becoming severe.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work, or daycare?

People with chickenpox should stay home until all the lesions become dry (usually around 5 days). If the rash is mild (meaning no blisters or fluid-filled lesions), and the lesions do not crust, the person should stay home until at least 24 hours have passed with no new lesions appearing. Special care should be taken not to expose people who are pregnant or have weakened immune systems to chickenpox.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting chickenpox?

- Make sure your children are up to date on their vaccines. Children aged 12 months to preschool age should have one dose of vaccine, while school-aged children and adults should have two doses of vaccine, if they are not already immune from having the disease.
- Wash hands frequently with water and soap. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)