

CHICKENPOX FACT SHEET (VARICELLA)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus.

Who gets chickenpox?

Chickenpox is very contagious and is usually a mild illness for children. It can be more severe for young infants, adolescents and adults. It can be life threatening for people with immune problems and women who are pregnant. Those pregnant or having immune problems should consult their health care provider immediately.

How is the virus spread?

Chickenpox is a respiratory disease that is spread by contact with nasal mucus and saliva. Coughing and sneezing, kissing on the lips, sharing food, eating utensils and mouthed toys, can spread it. Touching your hands to your nose and mouth, reusing tissues and forgetting to wash your hands after blowing noses also spread it.

When is it contagious?

Chickenpox is contagious from 2 days before the rash appears until 5 days after the start of the rash. In milder cases the contagious period may end sooner, around the time that the pox scab over. After exposure to chickenpox, it usually takes 11-14 days (up to 21) to develop the illness.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox presents with a distinctive rash of red bumps that blister, ooze and then crust over. The rash often starts on the abdomen, chest and back and then spreads to the face and limbs. Rash develops in crops thus presenting in various stages of development. Fever, loss of appetite and headache frequently accompany the rash.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

No specific treatment other than general supportive measures is recommended. Good nutrition, plenty of liquids to drink and rest is suggested. Children who are itchy can be bathed in water with baking soda or an oatmeal preparation and treated with skin lotions and antihistamine medications to relieve the itching. Aspirin is to be avoided due to the danger of Reye's syndrome.

When can my child return to school?

A child with chickenpox should stay home until 6 days after the start of the rash or when all lesions are scabbed over, whichever is earlier.

What about shingles?

Once a person has chickenpox, they usually cannot catch it again. The virus stays in the body, usually with no symptoms for life. In some the people, the virus will come out again as shingles – painful, blistering and red rash.