

July 2016

Chickenpox (varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. The same virus that causes chickenpox also causes shingles (herpes zoster). After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in the body in a dormant (inactive) state. For reasons that are not fully known, the virus can reactivate years later causing shingles.

Who gets chickenpox?

In the United States, most cases occur in young, school-aged children. However, the risk of chickenpox is low in persons who have received 2 doses of vaccine. Past infection with chickenpox generally makes a person immune; second occurrences of chickenpox are not common but can happen, particularly in immunocompromised persons.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Initial symptoms include sudden onset of fever, headache, and feeling tired. An itchy blister-like rash, usually starting on the face, chest or back, follows 1-2 days later. The rash then spreads to the rest of the body, and new blisters continue to appear for about 3-4 days. Generally within 1 week, the blisters dry out and scabs form and fall off.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear within 14 days of exposure but may occur any time from 10-21 days following exposure.

How is chickenpox spread?

The varicella-zoster virus spreads in the air when a person with chickenpox coughs or sneezes. The virus also is spread by direct contact with either the chickenpox or shingles rash before a scab forms. Another way to get chickenpox is by handling articles that are soiled by the infected person's chickenpox lesions, such as bed linens.

How long can an infected person carry chickenpox?

A person is contagious from 1-2 days before the rash appears and for as long as 5 days after the rash begins or until a scab forms over it. Once scabs form over the entire rash, the person can no longer spread the disease.

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July 2016 – page 2

What are the complications associated with chickenpox?

Chickenpox is generally mild, but complications may occur. The most common complications are bacterial infections of the skin and pneumonia. Less common, but severe, complications include swelling of the brain (encephalitis), meningitis, and Reye syndrome (almost exclusively in children who take aspirin). Some groups (e.g., pregnant women, newborns, immunocompromised persons, and adults) are at a higher risk for complications.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

In healthy children, chickenpox is usually a mild disease; treatment is directed at reducing discomfort. Children with chickenpox should not receive aspirin because of the possibility of causing Reye syndrome. Antiviral medications are available but usually are not necessary. People with chickenpox should stay home and away from other people until all lesions are crusted over.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

A vaccine to protect against chickenpox is available. Two doses are recommended. The first dose should be given at 12-15 months of age, and the second dose should be given before a child enters kindergarten (4-6 years of age). Varicella zoster immune globulin (VariZIG) also may be given to high-risk persons (e.g., newborns) if they are exposed to chickenpox in order to lessen the severity of illness.

How can I get more information about chickenpox?

- 1) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/>.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>
- 3) Contact your doctor.