

# Varicella (Chickenpox)

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## What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Chickenpox is an acute viral illness that causes a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness and fever. Anyone can get chickenpox, but it is more common in persons under 15 years of age. It is usually mild, but it can be serious, especially in young infants and adults. Severe complications are rare, however, chickenpox can cause bacterial infections of the skin, dehydration from vomiting or diarrhea, swelling of the brain, pneumonia and death.

## How do I get chickenpox?

Chickenpox is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact with lesion secretions or through the air from an infected person's coughing or sneezing.

## Symptoms

The chickenpox rash first appears on the trunk and face, but can spread over the entire body causing between 250 to 500 itchy blisters. The rash begins as small flat spots, becomes blister-like for 3-4 days, then scabs over. In children, chickenpox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5-10 days. Infected children most commonly experience symptoms that include high fever, severe itching, an uncomfortable rash, dehydration or headache.

## How long is an infected person contagious (able to spread the disease)?

The infectious period or time that an infected person can transmit chickenpox to others is from 1-2 days before the rash appears, until all blisters have crusted over to form scabs (usually about 5 days). It takes from 10-21 days (usually 14-16 days) after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox. The secondary attack rate among susceptible siblings is 70-90%.

## Treatment for chickenpox

- **Aspirin should be avoided** because it increases the risk of Reye's Syndrome, a serious disorder that can lead to coma and death.
- A healthcare provider can advise you on options for treatment of chickenpox; over-the-counter lotions are available to help relieve some of the itching.
- Contact your healthcare provider immediately if the individual with chickenpox seems extremely ill, has a fever that lasts longer than 4 days or rises above 102°F, is difficult to wake up or is confused, vomits repeatedly or has a severe cough, stiff neck, or difficulty walking and breathing.

## Prevention

Immunization is the only effective way to prevent chickenpox:

- Children, adolescents and adults who have never had chickenpox or received the vaccine should receive the chickenpox vaccine.
- The chickenpox vaccine may be given along with the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine in a combination vaccine called MMRV.
- Follow the Childhood Immunization Schedule (ask your health care provider or local health department for a copy).

## If you think you have chickenpox

- If your job involves caring for small children or healthcare, do not go to work until all blisters have crusted over.
- Children and health care workers with chickenpox should be excluded from school, work or child care settings until all blisters have crusted over.