

FACT SHEET: CHICKENPOX (Varicella)

July 2023

WHAT IS CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA)?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a highly contagious viral disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). It causes a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness, and fever.

WHO CAN GET CHICKENPOX?

Anyone can get chickenpox. Most people have had chickenpox by young adulthood, but it can occur in anyone who has not been previously vaccinated or had the disease. The illness is usually more severe or life-threatening in infants, the immuno-suppressed, adolescents, adults, and pregnant women. Chickenpox occurs most frequently in the winter and early spring.

HOW IS CHICKENPOX SPREAD?

Chickenpox is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact with fluid from blisters or with secretions from the respiratory tract or by handling an infected person's clothing or bedding. Airborne transmission occurs mainly through respiratory droplets that contain the virus, making the disease highly contagious even before the rash appears. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can spread it to her unborn baby before birth. Mothers with chickenpox can also give it to their newborn babies.

HOW SOON AFTER EXPOSURE DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

It takes from 10-21 days after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CHICKENPOX?

The first symptoms of chickenpox include a sudden onset of a slight fever and feeling tired and weak. Upper respiratory symptoms, such as a runny nose, may be present. These symptoms are followed by the appearance of an itchy blister-like rash, usually on the trunk of the body. The blister-like rash appears in "crops" and there can be several stages of the rash present at the same time. A blister-like rash occurs more frequently on areas of the body that are usually covered with clothing. However, they can appear on the scalp, in the mouth and throat, and on the area around the eye. The blisters become dry, and a scab is formed.

IS A PERSON WITH CHICKENPOX CONTAGIOUS?

A person with chickenpox is contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash develops until all blisters have formed scabs. If you visit a physician's office or a hospital emergency room, notify them immediately upon your arrival that you believe you have chickenpox. They will move you to an area that will not put others at risk for developing the disease.

HOW IS CHICKENPOX TREATED?

Recommend parents/guardians to call their health care provider. Non-aspirin medications (e.g., acetaminophen) can be given to relieve fever. Do not use aspirin or salicylate-containing products as it may cause Reye's syndrome, a potentially serious complication related to chickenpox.

HOW CAN CHICKENPOX BE PREVENTED?

Chickenpox can now be prevented by a safe and effective vaccine. All children between the ages of 12-15 months should receive their first dose. The second dose is recommended routinely when children are 4-6 years of age. If your child is not vaccinated and is exposed to chickenpox, contact your healthcare provider, as your child may still be protected if they are vaccinated immediately. Chickenpox vaccination is contraindicated during pregnancy.

SHOULD A PERSON WITH CHICKENPOX BE EXCLUDED FROM WORK OR SCHOOL?

A person with chickenpox should remain at home until all blisters are dried and scabbed over.

CAN YOU GET CHICKENPOX MORE THAN ONCE?

It is uncommon to have chickenpox more than once. For most people, one infection confers life-long immunity. However, a second infection is more common among immunocompetent persons.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about chickenpox and other related health topics can be found at the website [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the district residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (844) 493-2652.

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