

Chickenpox

— Chickenpox

— [Chickenpox vaccine](#)

Chickenpox is a common infection caused by a virus called varicella zoster.

It mostly affects children under 10, but you can get it at any age.

There's no cure for chickenpox. It gets better without treatment.

Try to keep a safe distance from other people if you or your child have chickenpox. Avoid contact with pregnant women and babies.

Symptoms of chickenpox

The main symptom of chickenpox is an itchy, spotty rash. It can start anywhere on your body, but spots are often first seen on your head or neck.

Chickenpox happens in 3 stages.

1 Small spots appear

The spots can:

- appear anywhere on the body - you can also get them inside your mouth
- get very itchy, usually after about 12 to 14 hours
- be red, pink, darker or the same colour as surrounding skin, depending on your skin tone
- be harder to see on brown and black skin



Small spots appear and become extremely itchy.

2 Spots become blisters

The spots fill with fluid and become blisters.

The blisters may:

- be very itchy - they are not usually painful
- burst
- spread or stay in a small area



Spots become blisters.

3 Blisters become scabs

Some spots form scabs, others leak fluid. This happens after 1 to 2 days.



Chickenpox spots scab over.

After 1 to 2 weeks, the scabs fall off.

New spots can keep appearing in waves for 3 to 5 days after the rash begins. There may be groups of spots at different stages of blistering or drying out.

Chickenpox can be very itchy. This can make children feel miserable, even if they do not have many spots.

Chickenpox is usually more severe in adults. Adults have a higher risk of developing complications.

Other symptoms of chickenpox

You may get other symptoms before or after the spots appear.

These include:

- [a high temperature above 38 degrees Celsius](#)
- aches and pains
- feeling unwell
- loss of appetite

How to treat chickenpox

There is no cure for chickenpox. But there are things you can do to help manage symptoms.

Ease pain and discomfort

To help control a fever and ease pain and discomfort, you or your child can take [paracetamol](#).

Don't

- ✗ do not use ibuprofen unless your GP tells you to - it can increase the risk of serious skin infections
- ✗ do not use aspirin or products containing aspirin - never give aspirin to children under age 16

Stop the itching

Chickenpox can be very itchy. Scratching can cause scarring. There are things you can do to help ease the itch.

Do

- ✓ keep your child's finger nails clean and short
- ✓ put socks on your child's hands at night to stop them scratching
- ✓ talk to a pharmacist for advice on using cooling creams, such as calamine lotion, or an [antihistamine medicine](#)
- ✓ bathe your child in lukewarm water and pat the skin dry

Keep hydrated

Drink plenty of water to avoid [dehydration](#).

Ice lollies are a good way of giving children fluids. They can also be soothing if your child has chickenpox spots in their mouth.

Wear cool clothes

Dress your child in loose-fitting clothes. Cotton fabrics are best and will help stop their skin from becoming sore and irritated.

When to get medical help

You or your child do not usually need any medical tests to diagnose chickenpox.

But some children and adults are at risk of serious problems if they get chickenpox.

People more at risk include:

- newborn babies
- [pregnant women](#)
- people with a weak immune system

► [When you might have a weak immune system](#)

If you are worried about getting the virus, your GP can arrange a [blood test](#).

This will check if you have chickenpox or if you are immune to it (protected from it). You are usually immune if you had chickenpox in the past. You can get chickenpox again, but this is not common.

Ask for an urgent GP appointment if:

- you or your child has a weak immune system and has been near someone with chickenpox
- the skin around the chickenpox blisters is hot and sore
- your child has chickenpox and is [dehydrated](#)
- you think your baby has chickenpox and they are under 1 month old
- the symptoms get worse, such as problems breathing and a headache that does not go away

Tell the GP surgery your child has chickenpox before you go there. They may need to take precautions to prevent the infection spreading.

Call 112 or 999 or go to an emergency department (ED) if

your child has chickenpox and they:

- have a fit or seizure
- have trouble walking or are very weak
- are drowsy or hard to wake

Tell ED or ambulance staff in advance that your child has chickenpox. They may need to take precautions to prevent the infection spreading.

Chickenpox in pregnancy

If you had chickenpox in the past, you are immune. You do not need to do anything.

Contact your GP or maternity hospital immediately if

you are not sure if you had chickenpox before and you:

- have been near someone who has the virus
- think you have chickenpox

Your treatment will depend on the stage of your pregnancy and your symptoms.

Most people have chickenpox in childhood. It's rare to get chickenpox while pregnant.

Most pregnant women who get chickenpox recover, with no harmful effects to the baby. But it can sometimes cause health problems for mothers and babies.

About 1 in 10 women who get chickenpox in pregnancy develops pneumonia (serious chest infection).

There's a small risk of your baby being born with an illness. This risk increases if you get chickenpox when you are over 36 weeks pregnant.

Contact your maternity hospital immediately if

you have chickenpox and you have:

- [bleeding from your vagina](#)
- any breathing problems or a bad cough
- a headache, stiff neck, difficulty looking at bright lights or drowsiness
- vomiting or feeling sick
- a rash that is bleeding

To stop your symptoms from getting worse, you may need:

- antiviral medicine through a drip
- immunoglobulin treatment - a blood-based treatment with antibodies to help fight the virus

⚠ Important

Tell hospital staff that you have chickenpox before you go there. This is to make sure chickenpox does not spread to other pregnant women or children.

How chickenpox spreads

You can catch chickenpox by being in the same room as someone who has the virus.

It also spreads by touching things that has fluid from the blisters on it.

How long chickenpox is infectious for

After you get the virus, it usually takes 1 to 3 weeks for spots to appear.

Chickenpox is infectious:

- from 2 days before the spots appear
- until the spots crust over - about 5 to 7 days after they first appear

Spots are no longer infectious when they are crusted over and dry.

Stop chickenpox spreading

Keep your child at home if they are unwell. If they have chickenpox, they are infectious from 2 days before spots appear.

While your child is unwell, remember to:

- [clean your and your child's hands often](#)
- cover coughs or sneezes with a tissue
- put used tissues into a bin and wash your hands

There are also things you can do to help stop the spread of the virus after spots appear.

Do

- ✓ keep your child off school, preschool or childcare until their spots are crusted over
- ✓ wipe down or sterilise any objects you or your child have touched, such as toys or household items
- ✓ wash infected bedding or clothing
- ✓ keep away from public areas and avoid contact with other people, where possible

Chickenpox (varicella) vaccine

You can get a vaccine to protect you or your child against chickenpox. The vaccine is called the [chickenpox \(varicella\) vaccine](#).

For anyone born:

- before 1 October 2024 you can pay to get the vaccine through your GP
- after 1 October 2024 the vaccine is free through the [HSE childhood vaccine schedule](#)

Travelling with chickenpox

Many airlines will not allow you to fly with chickenpox. Wait until spots crust over, if possible. Or check with your airline before you travel.

Shingles and chickenpox

Shingles is also caused by the varicella zoster virus. You can only get shingles if you had chickenpox.

When you have chickenpox, you usually develop antibodies to the infection and become immune to getting it again.

But the virus stays inactive in your body. The virus can be triggered again if your immune system is weakened. This causes [shingles](#).

[Shingles and chickenpox](#)

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