

Facts about chickenpox (varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is usually a mild illness in children. Infection in newborns, teenagers, adults, pregnant people and those with weakened immune systems can be more serious.

What are the complications of chickenpox?

Complications from chickenpox can include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain) and bacterial infections of the skin from scratching. Encephalitis can lead to seizures, deafness or brain damage. About one in every 3,000 adults with chickenpox will die from the infection.

Rarely, infection early in pregnancy can result in a baby being born with birth defects. This is known as congenital varicella syndrome. Babies may have a low birth weight, scars and problems with their limbs, eyes and brain. Chickenpox can also cause miscarriage or still birth.

Is there a vaccine?

There are two vaccines that protect against chickenpox:

- The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine
- The measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) vaccine

The vaccines are provided free as part of routine childhood immunizations and to those who need protection against chickenpox.

For more information, visit:

- [HealthLinkBC File #44b Chickenpox \(varicella\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #14e Measles, mumps, rubella and varicella \(MMRV\) vaccine](#)

How is chickenpox spread?

The virus spreads through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You can become infected when you breathe in this air or touch contaminated surfaces. The virus can spread through contact with an infected person's saliva, such as by sharing food, drinks, cigarettes or by kissing. It also spreads through contact with the fluid from chickenpox or shingles blisters. A pregnant person with chickenpox can pass it to their baby before birth.

People with chickenpox can spread the virus to others from 1 to 2 days before the chickenpox rash appears until the blisters of the rash have dried and crusted over (about 5 days later). People are most contagious from the day before and for the first few days after the rash appears.

It usually takes 2 to 3 weeks for a person to get sick after exposure to the virus. If your child is exposed to chickenpox, watch for signs of the illness for the next 2 to 3 weeks.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of chickenpox may include fever, aches, tiredness, headache and loss of appetite. A few days later, a rash appears. Red spots appear first on the face and scalp and then spread quickly down the body and to the arms and legs. The spots become itchy and begin to look like blisters filled with clear fluid. After another few days, the fluid becomes cloudy, the blisters break, and a crust or scab forms while the skin heals. During this time, new "crops" of spots appear, form blisters and then crust over. Chickenpox usually lasts about 10 days.

What is the treatment?

If you have been exposed to the virus or have symptoms of chickenpox, treatment may be recommended if you have not had chickenpox, shingles or the chickenpox vaccine. Treatment will depend on your age, health, and severity of the illness. Most healthy children will only need to stay at home and rest.

Treatment is recommended for people at high risk of severe illness, including:

- People who are pregnant
- Newborn infants
- People with a weakened immune system

Contact your health care provider immediately if you have been exposed to the virus or have symptoms of chickenpox.

Treatment must be started as soon as possible to reduce the illness and the risk of complications.

Treatment may include antiviral medication, an injection of varicella zoster immune globulin or the chickenpox vaccine.

What is the home treatment?

In most cases, chickenpox is a mild illness. If you are too sick to take part in regular activities or if you have a fever, you should stay home.

The most helpful things you can do are those that make you or your child feel more comfortable. You can take the following steps:

- Drink lots of liquids such as water, juice and soup, especially if there is a fever. If your baby is breastfeeding or chestfeeding, feed your baby more often
- Keep fingernails short and clean, and cover hands with gloves or socks at night to prevent scratching
- Keep the skin cool to relieve itching. Dress lightly and avoid hot baths and showers. Ask

your pharmacist or health care provider about lotions that can reduce the itching

- Prevent the spread of infection by using a household cleaner to wash any clothing or other items soiled with fluid from chickenpox blisters. Keep the infected person away from other family members who have not had chickenpox

Acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) or ibuprofen* (e.g. Advil®) can be given for fever or soreness. ASA (e.g. Aspirin®) should not be given to anyone under 18 years of age due to the risk of Reye syndrome.

*Ibuprofen should not be given to children under 6 months of age without first speaking to your health care provider.

For more information on Reye syndrome, visit [HealthLinkBC File #84 Reye syndrome](#).

What is shingles?

The same virus that causes chickenpox causes shingles. For some people who had chickenpox, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash with blisters called shingles.

Symptoms of shingles include headache, fever, nausea and chills. You may feel itching, tingling or extreme pain in the area where a rash develops several days later. It takes 2 to 4 weeks for the blisters to heal, although some scars may remain.

If you have shingles and feel well, you do not need to stay away from work or other activities, as long as the rash can be completely covered. Shingles cannot be passed from person to person. However, a person with shingles can spread chickenpox to someone who has not had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine. This is uncommon and requires direct contact with the fluid from the shingles blisters.

For more information about shingles, visit [HealthLinkBC File #111 Shingles vaccine](#).

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