

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is most common in young children but older children and adults who have never had chickenpox can be sick with it as well.

- Chickenpox may begin with a mild fever, followed in a day or two by a rash, which may be very itchy.
- The rash starts with red spots that soon turn into fluid-filled blisters. These blisters then open, the fluid dries and crusts form over the blisters.
- It takes 14-21 days from the time the virus gets into the body before symptoms start to show.

How is chickenpox spread?

- Chickenpox is spread very easily through the air or through contact with the fluid from a chickenpox blister.
- It can be spread from a pregnant woman to her baby before she gives birth.
- It spreads easily among people who have never had chickenpox and can spread within childcare centers, schools and families.
- Chickenpox is contagious one to possibly five days before the rash starts. A person can continue to spread it to others for up to five days from when the rash begins or until all the blisters have crusted over, whichever comes first.

When can children with chickenpox return to childcare or school?

Children can return to school or childcare if they feel well enough to participate in all activities even if they still have a rash.

Treatment

- People with chickenpox usually get better on their own. Medical treatment for chickenpox is usually not needed.
- Never give aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid-ASA) or any medicine that contains aspirin to a person who is sick with chickenpox. Aspirin can increase the risk of a severe illness called Reye's syndrome in people with chickenpox and other viral illnesses. To control fever, use acetaminophen (Tylenol®, Tempra®).
- For people with a high risk of complications, doctors sometimes prescribe medications to shorten the length of illness. If complications do develop, the doctor will determine the appropriate treatment.
- Calamine lotion may help with the itching. Keep fingernails short to prevent scratching and scarring.

Chickenpox and Pregnancy: The Risk

- Pregnant women who become infected with chickenpox can develop severe disease. Infection during pregnancy may lead to problems for the baby.
- If you are pregnant, have been in contact with someone who has chickenpox, and are unsure if you have had chickenpox, talk to your doctor as soon as possible after the exposure.
- A blood test can be done to see if you have protection against chickenpox. Depending on the blood test result, there may be further follow-up with your doctor.

What if I have no immunity, and am exposed to a case of chickenpox?

- If you are pregnant and have no immunity, see your doctor as soon as possible after the exposure.
- You may be advised to receive an injection of varicella-zoster immune globulin (VZIG) to help prevent severe infection.

What is Varicella-Zoster immune globulin (VZIG)?

- VZIG is a blood product that provides immediate protection against chickenpox. It is used in people who have never had chickenpox and have been exposed to someone with chickenpox and are either pregnant or have problems with their immune system.

What about the chickenpox vaccine?

- Chickenpox (varicella) vaccines are the best way to prevent chickenpox. Individuals should follow the Publicly Funded Immunization Schedule for Ontario for best protection.
- **Chickenpox vaccines should NOT be used during pregnancy.**
- Women who do not have protection from chickenpox as determined by a blood test, and are considering a future pregnancy should receive the vaccine. Women should not become pregnant for one month after completing the vaccine series. A reliable form of birth control must be used during that time.
- Chickenpox vaccine is free to children born on or after January 1, 2000 and for high-risk people of all ages who have not had the chickenpox. There is a charge for the vaccine if you do not fit into one of these categories. Discuss the fee with your doctor or a public health nurse at the health unit.

Shingles

- Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk of an illness called shingles (also known as herpes zoster). After being sick with chickenpox, the chickenpox virus stays in your body for life. Many years later, the virus can come back as shingles.
- Shingles causes a painful area of blisters, usually on one part of the body.
- Shingles is not as contagious as chickenpox but a person in contact with the fluid-filled blisters can get chickenpox if they have never had the virus before. A person with active sores can spread the virus to others for a week after the blister-like rash begins.
- A person with shingles can remain at school or work if the blisters are covered. Shingles is not spread through the air.
- There is a medication your doctor may prescribe that can lessen the severity of the illness.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Infectious Disease Control Team at 519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

Information adapted from:

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Last Updated: February 2020