

Chickenpox

Dear Parent or Guardian,

You are being provided with this fact sheet:

- because you or your child may have been exposed to Chickenpox.** If you believe your child has chickenpox, contact your medical provider. Notify your child care provider, school, or preschool immediately after the diagnosis has been made.
 - for informational purposes only.**
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What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a very contagious illness caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), a type of herpes virus. It is often a mild illness, but may be severe in infants, pregnant women, adults and persons with weakened immune systems.

What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?

Chickenpox has a characteristic itchy rash that often starts on the trunk and face with pink spots and tiny fluid-filled blisters ("pox") that then dry and become scabs in 4 to 5 days. The rash may be the first sign of illness and sometimes occurs with fever* and general fatigue. An infected person may have anywhere from only a few pox to more than 500 (average 300-400) pox on their body during the illness. Chickenpox can sometimes have severe complications such as bacterial skin infections and pneumonia. Some children who have been vaccinated against chickenpox can get a mild case of chickenpox with a small number of spots that may not go on to blister and crust.

How is Chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox virus is highly contagious and is spread by direct contact with secretions from saliva or the fluid from the pox of an infected individual, or by respiratory secretions released into the air from sneezing or coughing. The illness may start between 10 to 21 days after contact with an infected person. Infected persons are contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears, until all the pox have formed scabs -- usually 5 days from the time the pox appeared. During this timeframe, an infected person should remain home until all pox are scabbed over. A person who has never had chickenpox or chickenpox vaccine has a 90% chance of becoming infected if exposed to a family member with chickenpox. Chickenpox can also be spread by direct contact with the blisters of a person with shingles if the person has never had chickenpox and has not received the varicella vaccine.

How is Chickenpox diagnosed?

Chickenpox is typically diagnosed by the symptoms and the characteristic appearance of the rash. Occasionally a healthcare provider will use laboratory tests for chickenpox if the diagnosis is unclear or if the illness is severe.

What should I do if I've been exposed to chickenpox?

If you are already immune to chickenpox, you most likely won't become sick. Most people do not get chickenpox more than once. If you're not already immune to chickenpox, varicella vaccine given within 3 days of exposure can possibly prevent chickenpox. Vaccination 3 to 5 days after exposure probably won't prevent chickenpox but it may make it milder. Persons at high risk for complications from chickenpox, such

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Adapted from the Snohomish Health District

as immunocompromised persons, pregnant women, and premature infants, should contact their healthcare provider immediately.

How is chickenpox treated?

General comfort measures are all that are needed for most cases of chickenpox. Keeping fingernails short and clean can help avoid infection from scratching. Warm oatmeal baths and Calamine lotion can temporarily help with itching. Fever reducing medication, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, may be given if the child has a fever. Do not give aspirin to a child with fever, as this has been associated with Reye Syndrome. If a lesion or blister becomes red, swollen, develops pus in it, or a high fever occurs, consult a health care provider immediately.

How is Chickenpox prevented?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent chickenpox. The vaccine is highly effective at preventing chickenpox, especially severe cases of the illness and its complications. Two doses of varicella vaccine are recommended for children 12 months of age and older and adults if they have not had chickenpox. All healthy children should routinely receive their first dose of vaccine at 12-15 months of age. A second dose of vaccine is routinely recommended for all children 4-6 years of age. Children 13 years and older and adults who do not have evidence of prior immunity routinely receive 2 doses of vaccine. Second dose catch-up vaccination is recommended for children, adolescents, and adults who previously received 1 dose. The doses should be at least three months apart for children 12 months through 12 years, and at least 4 weeks apart for individuals 13 years of age and older.

The vaccine occasionally causes mild side effects including fever and a mild rash that can occur 5 to 26 days after immunization. You don't need the vaccine if you have already had chickenpox illness. If you are not sure whether you have had chickenpox, talk to your healthcare provider about getting a blood test.

To prevent the spread of chickenpox, it is also recommended to clean and sanitize surfaces and practice good handwashing. Ventilate rooms with fresh outdoor air.

Exclude from group setting?

Yes. Children with chickenpox need to be excluded from child care or school until all the blisters have formed scabs.

* Fever is defined as: temperature above **100°F (37.8°C) under the arm or 101°F (38.3°C) orally**

American Academy of Pediatrics

- Managing Infectious Diseases in Child Care and Schools pages 77-78.

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