

Chickenpox (Varicella-Zoster)

Dear Parent or Guardian,

You are being provided with this fact sheet:

- Because you or your child may have been exposed to Chickenpox.
 - For informational purposes only.
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General Information About Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

- Chickenpox (varicella) is caused by the varicella zoster virus, a type of herpes virus.
- Once a person has chickenpox, the virus usually stays in the body and can cause shingles in adults.
- There is a vaccine to prevent chickenpox available for anyone older than 1 year.

Who can get it?

- Anyone can get chickenpox, but it is less likely if they have had the varicella vaccine.
- It is rare, but a person can get a mild case of chickenpox if they have already had it.
- Some groups are at higher risk of getting very sick or developing medical problems, including:
 - Children under 1 year old
 - Children over 12 years
 - Adults
 - People with weakened immune systems
 - Pregnant people
 - People who have not received the varicella vaccination
- **People in a higher risk group (see above) should contact their healthcare provider if they think they've been exposed to, or have, chickenpox.**

What are the symptoms?

- The main symptom is an itchy, blister-like rash that often starts on the back, chest, and face. The blisters ("pox") are small, pink, and contain fluid.
- After 4 to 5 days the pox dry up and form scabs.
- A person can have anywhere from only a few pox to more than 500 pox on their body during the illness.
- Other symptoms can include:
 - Fever (American Academy of Pediatrics defines fever as a temperature of 100.4°F [38°C] or higher)
 - Unusually tired/low activity level
 - Lack of appetite
 - Headache
- Chickenpox can sometimes cause bacterial skin infections and pneumonia, which can be serious.

How is it spread?

- It spreads very easily. A person who has never had chickenpox, or has never had the chickenpox vaccine, has a 90% chance of becoming infected if they are near a person with chickenpox.

- The virus is found in the fluid from blisters and scabs.
 - The virus can be found in the air after a person with chickenpox exhales (for example, when breathing, speaking, singing, exercising, coughing, or sneezing) and releases droplets and small particles into the air.
 - The smaller particles hang in the air and can stay there for hours (this is called airborne).
 - The droplets, which are larger, usually don't travel more than 6 feet.
 - It spreads:
 - When a person breathes in the droplets or small particles.
 - By touching an object or surface that has the virus on it and then touching the mouth, eyes, or nose.
 - By sharing utensils or cups with someone who has chickenpox.
 - Chickenpox can also be spread by touching the blisters of a person who has **shingles**.
 - It can take 10 to 21 days for symptoms to develop after being around a person with chickenpox.
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How Do I Know If My Child Has Chickenpox?

A healthcare provider can diagnose chickenpox by looking at the rash or blisters on a person's skin.

Please tell your healthcare provider you are concerned about chickenpox when you call to schedule the appointment. The healthcare provider may have special instructions for your visit.

This fact sheet provides general information only.

What If My Child Has Chickenpox?

Notify your child care provider or preschool immediately if your child has chickenpox.

How is it treated?

- A healthcare provider may prescribe antiviral medications to treat chickenpox, particularly for people who have severe symptoms or are at risk of serious complications. Talk with your healthcare provider about treatment options.
- Keep children comfortable, allow them to rest, make sure they drink plenty of fluids, and check on them often.
- Warm oatmeal baths and Calamine lotion can temporarily help with itching.
- Infants 3 months or younger with a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher should be seen by their healthcare provider.
- Talk with your child's healthcare provider if you have any concerns about your child's symptoms.
Consult with your child's healthcare immediately if:
 - **They have a high fever (above 102°F [38.9°C]), or their fever lasts longer than 4 days.**
 - **There are signs of a bacterial infection: the area around the pox becomes red, warm, swollen, or tender, or the pox develop pus (thick discolored fluid).**
 - **They have a stiff neck, frequent vomiting, or difficulty breathing.**

How can I help prevent chickenpox from spreading?

- Vaccination is the best way to prevent chickenpox.

- You don't need the vaccine if you have already had chickenpox. If you are not sure whether you have had chickenpox, talk to your healthcare provider about getting a blood test.
 - Increase indoor ventilation.
 - Wash hands often, especially after sneezing, coughing, wiping noses, and touching the blisters.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - Avoid sharing cups, eating utensils, food, and drinks with anyone who has chickenpox.
 - Thoroughly clean toys and other objects children put into their mouths with soap and water.
 - Clean and sanitize household surfaces.
 - Keep fingernails short to help minimize scratching and scarring. Keeping fingernails clean can help avoid skin infections.
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What Should I Do If My Child Has Been Exposed to Chickenpox?

- **If they are already immune to chickenpox** (they have had 2 doses of the varicella vaccine or have already had chickenpox), they most likely won't become sick. Most people do not get chickenpox more than once.
 - **If they are not immune to chickenpox** (they have not received 2 doses of the varicella vaccine or had the chickenpox), **getting the varicella vaccine within 3 days of exposure can help prevent it.** Vaccination 3 to 5 days after exposure probably won't prevent chickenpox but it may make it milder. Talk with your healthcare provider about what to do.
 - **Persons at high risk for complications from chickenpox, such as immunocompromised persons, pregnant people, and premature infants, should contact their healthcare provider immediately.**
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Does My Child Need to Stay Home from Child Care?

If your child has been EXPOSED to chickenpox, they do not need to stay home from child care unless they develop chickenpox symptoms.

If your child HAS chickenpox, they need to stay home. Anyone with chickenpox, including those who have been vaccinated, need to stay home from child care until all the blisters have formed scabs and no new lesions have appeared for 24 hours.

Please follow your child care program's sickness policy.

References:

American Academy of Pediatrics

- *Caring for Our Children. Chapter 7 Infectious Diseases, 7.7 Herpes Viruses, 7.7.4 Varicella-Zoster (Chickenpox) Virus*
- *Managing Infectious Diseases in Child Care and Schools, 5th Edition. pages 71-73*

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

- *Chickenpox (Varicella).* <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html>

MedlinePlus

- *Chickenpox.* <https://medlineplus.gov/chickenpox.html>