

Varicella (Chickenpox) Fact Sheet

Varicella, or chickenpox, is a very contagious rash illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus

Chickenpox is usually mild in otherwise healthy young children, but it can be more serious in newborn babies, older children, and adults. Once you've had chickenpox, you usually don't get it again, but the virus can lie dormant in your body and reactivate later in life, causing shingles (also called herpes zoster).

Rare but more severe complications of chickenpox include pneumonia (lung infection), skin infection, blood infection, and infection or swelling in the brain. Pregnant women, newborn babies, and people with weakened immune systems are at greatest risk for complications.

Chickenpox is spread from person to person

Chickenpox is very contagious. You can get the virus by directly touching the fluid from rash blisters of someone with chickenpox, or by breathing in virus particles that come from the blisters. People with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1 to 2 days before the rash develops until all the lesions are crusted over (usually 4 to 7 days after they appear).

People with the shingles rash can also spread the virus to someone who has not had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine.

Signs and symptoms of chickenpox

The classic symptom of chickenpox is a rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters that eventually scab over. The rash may first show up on the chest, back, and face before spreading to the rest of the body. Other symptoms include:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Headache

Symptoms appear 10 to 21 days (usually 14 to 16 days) after exposure to someone with chickenpox. Itchy blisters are often concentrated on the face, scalp, and chest or back. It usually takes about a week for the blisters to scab over.

Talk to your healthcare provider if you think you have chickenpox

Always call your doctor's office before visiting so that steps can be taken to limit the risk of exposing others to chickenpox. Chickenpox is often diagnosed by its symptoms; however, since the rash can sometimes resemble other common rash illnesses, it can be helpful to get a lab test to confirm your diagnosis. If you're diagnosed with chickenpox, you should stay home from work, school, or other settings where you might have close contact with others until all blisters have scabbed over.

Your doctor might prescribe antiviral medication to treat your infection, or recommend over-the-counter remedies to manage your symptoms.

Talk to your healthcare provider if you think you have been in contact with someone with chickenpox

If you haven't had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine, you can become infected with the virus in as little as a few minutes of contact with an infected person. If you've been exposed, your doctor may recommend treatment that can prevent you from getting sick or lessen the severity of your illness if you do get sick. These treatments are most effective if given soon after your exposure. People who don't receive treatment may need to stay home from work or school and avoid contact with others for up to 21 days, so it's important to contact your healthcare provider right away.

Anyone who has been exposed to chickenpox should monitor for signs of illness. If you become sick, avoid contact with others and contact your healthcare provider immediately.

Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from chickenpox

The varicella vaccine is the most effective way to prevent chickenpox. Two doses of vaccine are recommended for all healthy children 13 years and under. Everyone older than 13 should also get 2 doses of the varicella vaccine if they've never had chickenpox or were never vaccinated.