

CHICKENPOX

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is an infection that produces an itchy rash and fluid-filled blisters over the body. The disease is most common in children, although it may also cause illness in adolescents and adults.

The disease is more severe in adults. Pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems are at highest risk of serious complications. Infection in pregnant women can be passed along to the fetus. If infection occurs during the first 28 weeks of pregnancy, the baby can be born with complications.

Most people recover completely from chickenpox, although some individuals may experience scarring of the skin or develop skin infections. In rare cases, the person may develop pneumonia or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). A few people die every year in Canada from chickenpox.

Chickenpox may be seen throughout the year but is more common in winter and early spring.

Symptoms of chickenpox

Chickenpox is usually a mild disease. It may begin with a fever, a feeling of being unwell, nausea, headache, sore throat, pain in both ears, and complaints of pressure in the head or a swollen face. Often the first symptom in children is the appearance of an itchy red rash, followed by a feeling of being unwell, a loss of appetite and a fever of 38°C but may be as high as 42°C.

The rash progresses from red bumps to fluid-filled blisters that break, scab over and heal. There can be 250 to 500 of these lesions in varying stages during the period of illness. The lesions may appear on the scalp, under the arms, inside the mouth and upper respiratory tract and on the conjunctiva of the eyes. These blistering lesions may last from four-to-seven days, and the appearance of any new blisters usually diminishes after the fifth day. Secondary bacterial infection of skin lesions is the most common complication in healthy children.

Are certain people at risk of complications from chickenpox?

Yes, there may be an increased risk of complications for pregnant women or people with weakened immune systems, such as:

- Newborns less than one month of age or born prematurely
- Children with leukemia
- People taking medications after organ transplant
- People taking steroids
- People with cancer, AIDS or HIV infection or other problems with the immune system

Individuals who are at increased risk of complications should contact their physician within four days after an exposure to chickenpox as they may be able to receive an immune globulin to help prevent or reduce the severity of infection.

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How does chickenpox spread?

The chickenpox virus spreads through:

- Direct contact with the fluid-filled blister
- The air when an infected person coughs or sneezes
- Childbirth when a pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it on to her baby before birth
- Indirectly by articles freshly soiled by discharges from the blisters and mucous membranes of infected people

Infected persons can spread chickenpox before they know they have it as they are contagious one-to-two days before their rash appears. The contagious period lasts until all the blisters have scabbed over, which is usually about five days.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

Immunization with the chickenpox vaccine (varicella) is the single, most effective way to protect people from chickenpox. The vaccine is also available for people who have been exposed to the virus, have not experienced any symptoms and who are not fully protected through previous immunization against the disease.

The varicella vaccine is part of Ontario's Routine Immunization Schedule. Two doses are typically given, the first at 15 months of age and the second at four-to-six years of age.

How is chickenpox treated?

Chickenpox treatment generally relieves disease symptoms and prevent complications, and may include:

- Reducing a fever by getting adequate rest, drinking fluids and taking a fever reducing medication such as acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) if needed. Products containing salicylates (e.g., Aspirin) should not be used
- Relieving itchiness by taking baths in lukewarm water with baking soda. Do not rub the blisters vigorously. Pat dry the affected areas only.
- Avoiding scratching scabs as this may result in permanent scars and/or infections. Always keep a child's fingernails short and wash hands frequently with soap.
- Contacting your health care professional if you or your child has more severe symptoms.

Hygiene is very important. This includes bathing, soaks and closely cropped fingernails to avoid a source of secondary bacterial infection associated with scratching of the skin lesion.

Please Note: The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that a child with chickenpox can return to school or daycare as soon as the child can participate normally in all activities. Exclusion periods (policies that require individuals to stay home for a period of time) are not recommended for chickenpox because by the time it is known that a person has chickenpox, it has already been passed on to other people.