

## Varicella (Chickenpox)- Factsheet

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious rash illness caused by a virus called *Varicella-zoster virus*.

### What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms usually start about two weeks after exposure. The first symptoms include sudden onset of fever and feeling tired and weak. Soon after, an itchy rash will appear on the body, with spots (lesions) changing in stages from flat red spots to raised bumps to fluid-filled blisters, and eventually to dried, crusted scabs. New spots continue to appear for about 3-4 days. The spots will dry up and scab over before falling off, and do not usually leave a scar.

### How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is very contagious. It is easily spread by airborne droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person. Direct contact with fluid from the rash blisters can also spread the disease. If a person who is pregnant gets chickenpox, the baby can also get infected while in the womb. People who have shingles can also spread the same virus that causes chickenpox to people who come in direct contact with their rash; people with shingles cannot give anyone else shingles.

### How long are people contagious?

A person is contagious beginning 1-2 days before the rash appears, and until all lesions are dry and crusted over (which usually takes 4-7 days, but depends on the person). Some people, especially if they have had the varicella vaccine before, can have very mild cases of chickenpox, and may not get the type of rash that blisters and crusts over. In those cases, people should stay home until at least 24 hours have passed with no new lesions (spots) appearing.

### Who gets chickenpox?

Anyone can get chickenpox. Those who are not vaccinated are at higher risk of becoming infected and having more severe disease. Chickenpox usually results in lifelong immunity. However, the virus can stay hidden in the cells of your nervous system and may return years later as shingles.

### What treatment is available for people with chickenpox?

In healthy children, chickenpox is usually a mild disease. The itch and discomfort can be relieved with oatmeal baths or calamine lotion. Chickenpox can be more serious in unvaccinated older teens or adults, or in people who are pregnant or have weakened immune systems. These people should contact their doctor right away if they become sick with chickenpox, because they may need antiviral medicine to keep it from becoming severe.

### Do people with chickenpox need to be kept home from school, work, or childcare?

People with chickenpox should stay home until all the lesions become dry and crusted over (which usually takes between 4-7 days). If the rash is mild (meaning no blisters or fluid-filled lesions), and the lesions do not crust, the person should stay home until at least 24 hours have passed with no new lesions appearing. Special care should be taken not to expose people who have no immunity to chickenpox, are pregnant, or have weakened immune systems.

## How can I protect myself and my family from getting chickenpox?

- Make sure your children are up-to-date on their vaccines. Children aged 12 months to preschool age should have one dose of varicella vaccine, while school-aged children and adults should have two doses of varicella vaccine (if they are not already immune from having the disease before).
- Wash hands frequently with water and soap. Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.