



Chicken Pox (Varicella)

What is Chicken Pox?

Varicella or chicken pox is a highly contagious illness in children, adolescents, and adults caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Fever and a fluid-filled rash are associated with the illness. Varicella-zoster virus also causes shingles.

How is Chicken Pox spread?

Chicken Pox is spread by direct contact. A person can get Chicken Pox by breathing in airborne droplets that contain the virus, or by touching the fluid-filled rash. After being exposed to the virus it may take 14 to 21 days to break out with the Chicken Pox rash. Chicken Pox is contagious 1 to 5 five days before, and five days after the rash appears, and until all pox have dried and scabbed over.

What are the symptoms?

Some children have a slight fever and aches and pains before the rash develops, however the first sign of Chicken Pox in children is usually a rash. Most children also have loss of appetite and headache during the first few days of the illness.

Chicken Pox is much more severe in adults. The rash is more severe and fever more common.

What does the rash look like?

(see picture at top of page)

The rash first appears on the head and face, spreads quickly down the body and onto the arms and legs. The rash is usually worse on the face, chest, stomach and back than on the arms and legs. The pox (rash) progresses rapidly and goes through the following stages:

1. Red spot
2. Vesicle (blister filled with clear fluid)
3. Pustule (blister filled with cloudy fluid)
4. Crust or scab

New pox appear in clusters for 3 or 4 days, therefore pox in all stages could be present at the same time. The rash is itchy and may be intense enough to cause great discomfort.

What treatment is available?

- Rest and drink plenty of fluids. It is important to stay cool, calm, and dry. Becoming hot and sweaty will make the itching worse.
- Use good hygiene (stay clean)
- Stay out of the sun.
- Do not scratch the itchy rash or pick the scabs because the skin can get infected. Keep nails cut short. Wear mitts or socks on the hands when sleeping.
- Bathing in Aveeno (oatmeal), then applying calamine lotion to dry skin can help lessen the itch.
- Never use aspirin for fever, as it has been associated with Reye syndrome, use products that contain acetaminophen (Tylenol) only.
- Contact your doctor if the symptoms are severe, as there are prescription medications that can help.

What are the possible complications?

Complications are rare but do occur in 5% to 10% of healthy children.

- Skin infections that leave scars
- Pneumonia (infection of the lungs)
- Encephalitis (infection of the brain)

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Can Chicken Pox be prevented?

Yes. There is a vaccine called Varivax III. It is used to vaccinate people 12 months of age and older against the varicella (Chicken Pox) virus. Your doctor can provide the vaccine for a fee. You can only get the vaccine if you have not had Chicken Pox.

Why do I need protection from Chicken Pox? Isn't it a harmless illness?

- Chicken Pox is usually a mild disease for children but it is impossible to know who will develop complications to the illness.
- The illness costs parents a great deal in lost wages and prepaid childcare. (Most children are ill for 3 to 5 days)
- Children miss up to a week of school
- People who have had Chicken Pox can get shingles years later. Shingles can be painful and it can take weeks to recover.
- Chicken Pox can be life threatening for newborns, adults, and anyone with a weak immune system.
- Babies who get Chicken Pox from their mothers before birth can be born with birth defects.



Complication: Infected Chicken Pox rash

Call the doctor if:

- Fever lasts longer than 4 days or rises above 40°C (104°F)
- Pox get bigger or contain thick yellowish-white pus

Seek **immediate** medical attention if:

- Pox are near or in the eyes
- The person with Chicken Pox has a severe cough, has a seizure, starts vomiting, has trouble breathing or is breathing fast, seems very ill, has trouble waking up, has trouble walking, is confused, or has a stiff neck.

References: *Canadian Paediatric Society/Merck Frosst/CDC (Center for Disease Control)*
Photos from: *Dermatology Image Atlas - Johns Hopkins University*

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