

Chickenpox and Chickenpox Vaccine Information Sheet

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common childhood infection that also causes illness in adolescents and adults. It is highly contagious. A virus called varicella-zoster causes chickenpox. For some people the virus can become active again later in their life and cause a painful rash called “shingles” or herpes zoster.

How does Chickenpox spread?

The chickenpox virus spreads through:

- direct contact with the fluid in a chickenpox blister
- the air, by coughing and sneezing
- a pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it on to her baby before birth.

Infected persons often spread chickenpox even before the rash appears. They are considered contagious from 1-2 days before the rash appears until all the blisters have scabbed over.

What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is typically a mild disease. It usually begins with a fever and within a day or two an itchy red rash develops. The rash progresses from red bumps to fluid-filled blisters that break, scab over and heal. Chickenpox can cause problems such as scarring of the skin, skin infections and pneumonia. Rarely, more serious illness can occur, such as inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). A few people die every year in Canada from chickenpox.

Any person who has contact with Chickenpox and is in any of the following groups should see his/her doctor as soon as possible:

- pregnant women
- newborns less than 1 month of age or born prematurely
- children with leukemia
- people taking medications after organ transplant
- people taking medications called steroids
- people with cancer, AIDS or HIV infection or other problems with the immune system.

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How can Chickenpox be prevented?

There is now a vaccine available to protect people who are susceptible to varicella infection. There are a number of varicella vaccines that are licensed in Canada. A single dose is recommended for children 12 months to 12 years of age. People 13 years and older will receive two doses at least four weeks apart. The need for booster doses at this time is unknown. The vaccine can be given at the same time as other childhood vaccines. Side effects may include redness, pain or swelling at the injection site. Less often, a fever or rash may appear. Rarely, some people may develop a blister-like rash following immunization; if this happens, contact your health care provider. There is a minimal risk that the rash could transmit the vaccine virus to susceptible people with whom you are in close contact.

Who should not be immunized?

Chickenpox vaccine should not be given to people who:

- have an allergy to any components of the vaccine
- had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of chickenpox vaccine
- are pregnant or wish to become pregnant within the next 3 months
- are infants less than one year old
- are taking steroid medication
- have cancer, AIDS or HIV infection or other problems with the immune system
- are ill with an infection or fever (wait until you are well before having the vaccine).

How is Chickenpox treated?

The treatment is mainly to relieve the symptoms and prevent complications.

- Get adequate rest and fluid intake to reduce fever. A fever reducing medication such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) may be helpful. Products containing salicylates (e.g. Aspirin) should not be used.
- Baths using lukewarm water with baking soda added may relieve itchiness; no vigorous rubbing, pat dry.
- Scratching scabs may result in permanent scars and/or infections, therefore keep child's fingernails short and wash hands frequently with soap.

If you or your child have more severe symptoms, contact your Health Care Professional.