

Chickenpox (Varicella)

Definition:

Chickenpox is a common illness in children caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). It is highly contagious. It can cause an itchy, blister-like rash, among other symptoms. Chickenpox can be serious, especially during pregnancy, in babies, adolescents, adults, and people with weakened immune systems. The virus readily transmits from individuals with chickenpox to those who have never experienced the illness or have not received vaccination. The best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. Some people who are vaccinated can still get chickenpox. However, the symptoms are usually milder, with fewer or no blisters (they may have just red spots) and low or absent fever.

Signs and Symptoms

The classic symptom of chickenpox is a rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters that eventually turn into scabs. The rash may first appear on the chest, back, and face, then spread over the entire body, including inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area.

Other typical symptoms that may begin to appear one to two days before rash include:

- fever
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- headache

Transmission

Chickenpox is a virus transmitted primarily through close contact with an infected person. It can be transmitted through direct skin-to-skin contact or by inhaling the virus from an infected person's coughing or sneezing. Additionally, it can be transmitted through contact with a child's eyes, nose, or mouth fluids.

Once exposed, symptoms usually appear within a couple of weeks. But chickenpox may take as few as 10 and as many as 21 days to develop. Chickenpox is contagious for one to two days before the rash starts and until the blisters have all dried and become scabs. The blisters usually dry and become scabs within five to seven days of the onset of the rash. Children should stay home and away from other children until all blisters have scabbed over. Vaccinated people who get chickenpox may develop lesions that do not crust. These people are considered contagious until no new lesions have appeared for 24 hours. For most people, getting chickenpox once provides immunity for life.

The varicella-zoster virus also causes shingles (zona). After chickenpox, the virus remains in the body (dormant). People get shingles when VZV reactivates in their bodies after they already had chickenpox. People with shingles can spread VZV to people who have never had chickenpox or never received the chickenpox vaccine. This can happen through direct contact with fluid from shingles and rash blisters. If they get infected, they will develop chickenpox, not shingles.

Treatment:

- Antipyretic (to reduce fever). Children with chickenpox should NEVER be given aspirin.
- Skin lotion (to relieve itchiness)
- Antiviral drugs (for severe cases)
- Bed rest
- Drinking plenty of fluids (to prevent dehydration)
- Cool baths (to relieve itching)

Children should not scratch the blisters because it could lead to secondary bacterial infections. Keep fingernails short to decrease the likelihood of scratching.