Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is chickenpox?
Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella virus. Chickenpox is now uncommon since the vaccine protects children. Although chickenpox may be a mild illness, some children and adults can have serious life threatening illness.

What are the symptoms?
Chickenpox infection usually starts as a rash on the chest that rapidly spreads to the rest of the body. The rash tends to appear first on the covered areas of the body and begins as small red bumps. The red bumps then turn into fluid-filled blisters. The blisters will "crust" or "scab" over and fall off in about one to two weeks. Children often get as many as 300 to 500 blisters per infection. The child may have bumps, blisters and scabs all at the same time. Bumps and blisters usually itch very badly.

A person with chickenpox may also have fever, headache and fatigue (tiredness).

How is chickenpox spread?
Chickenpox is very contagious (easy to spread). A person can catch chickenpox by coming in contact with the fluid from the blisters or breathing the air when an infected person speaks or coughs.

A person infected with chickenpox is contagious from one to two days before the rash breaks out until all the blisters have scabbed over and dried up.

Persons with chickenpox should stay home from school, childcare or work, and away from others who have not had chickenpox until all the scabs have dried up.

Who is at risk for more severe illness with serious complications?
Adults, infants, adolescents, pregnant women, and people whose immune systems have been weakened because of illness (e.g., HIV, cancer, leukemia, etc.) or medications such as long-term use of steroids.

How is chickenpox treated?
1. Take acetaminophen for fever and pain. DO NOT TAKE ASPIRIN!
2. Drink plenty of water.
3. Since the rash itches badly, cool soda baths may help. To make a soda bath, add half a cup of baking soda to a small amount of cool water in the bathtub.
4. If caring for a child with chickenpox, try to keep him busy with quiet games, puzzles or coloring books so he won't think about the itching all the time.
5. For severe itching, your health care provider may suggest other medications.
6. Keep your fingernails short and hands clean to help keep the rash from becoming infected.
7. The scabs should fall off by themselves. Do not pick the scabs since this could increase the chances or permanent scarring.
8. A medicine called acyclovir can help shorten or combat chickenpox, but is most useful when given within 24 hours of first seeing the rash.

-over-

Can chickenpox be prevented?
Chickenpox can be prevented or the seriousness of the infection lessened by getting your child the Varicella vaccine. NC Immunization Law now requires children born after April 1, 2001 to receive this vaccine on or after their first birthday. Older children can also safely receive this vaccine from the Guilford County Department of Public Health or their private health care provider.

How long does chickenpox last?
The average for a chickenpox outbreak is about seven days. Chickenpox may last a longer time if the person has several hundred blisters or has other medical conditions.

If your child develops a bad cough, stiff neck, high fever or any of the blisters become infected; call your health care provider immediately.

For more information, call the Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health at (336) 641-7777 or visit our website at www.guilfordcountync.gov

Free language assistance available upon request.

PEC APP 10/10
Revised 05/2023