



Chickenpox (Varicella)

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the signs or symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox usually begins with a mild fever, tiredness, headache, or decreased appetite. Within 1–2 days, an itchy rash develops. The rash often starts on the chest, back, or face and then spreads to the rest of the body. It progresses from flat spots to fluid-filled blisters, which eventually crust and scab over. New spots may continue to appear for several days, so it is common to see spots in different stages at the same time. The rash may appear red or pink on lighter skin tones or more subtle/purple on darker skin tones. The rash is typically very itchy and lasts about 5–7 days.

How long does it take for chickenpox symptoms to develop?

On average, someone who was exposed to chickenpox might expect to see symptoms 14-16 days following their exposure, though this could range anywhere from 10-21 days.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads easily from person to person through droplets that linger in the air from coughing or sneezing. It is also spread through direct contact with fluid from chickenpox blisters or active shingles rash.

A person with chickenpox is contagious from 1–2 days before the rash appears until all blisters have crusted over (usually about 5 days after rash onset).

How contagious is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is highly contagious. Most people who are not immune and are exposed will become infected. It spreads easily in shared indoor spaces such as schools and households.

How dangerous is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is usually a mild illness in healthy children, but it can sometimes lead to serious complications, including skin infections, pneumonia, or brain inflammation (encephalitis).

Chickenpox can be more severe in infants, pregnant individuals, and people with weakened immune systems. These groups are more likely to experience serious complications if infected.

What is considered immunity to chickenpox?

In general, documented chickenpox immunity means:

- Documentation of age-appropriate varicella vaccination
- Birth in the United States before 1980
- Lab result or provider documentation of previous infection with chickenpox or shingles
- Lab result showing a positive titer (IgG)

Sometimes, complicated scenarios can make it hard to determine someone's immunity. In these situations, Columbia County's Health Officer may review and advise on a case-by-case basis.

How safe and effective is the chickenpox vaccine?

Varicella (chickenpox) vaccines have been thoroughly studied and is safe and effective. The risk of side effects from the vaccine is much lower than the risk of complications from chickenpox.

One dose is about 85% effective at preventing infection, while two doses are about 92–98% effective. Vaccination is almost 100% effective at preventing severe illness; people who get chickenpox after vaccination usually have a much milder case.

I was told that I/my child may be excluded from work/school if there is a chickenpox outbreak. What would this exclusion look like?

If a chickenpox outbreak is identified in a school or childcare setting, individuals without evidence of immunity may be excluded for up to 21 days following their last exposure. This is an important step to prevent the spread of chickenpox to others. Excluded individuals may be allowed to return if they receive a chickenpox vaccine.

If you do not develop chickenpox following an exposure, you will be permitted to return after the 21-day exclusion, though you may be excluded again if re-exposed. If you develop chickenpox following an exposure, you will be permitted to return once it is determined you are no longer contagious.

I don't know if I'm immune to chickenpox, or can't find my documentation of immunity. What should I do?

If you believe you have received chickenpox immunizations but cannot find documentation, contact your health care provider or Columbia County Public Health; they may be able to locate your immunization records.

If you are unsure if you are immune to chickenpox, a health care provider may be able to give you another vaccine, or do a blood test to confirm. This is commonly referred to as a titer, or IgG.

I have additional questions about chickenpox. Who can I contact?

For general questions or to learn more about chickenpox in Columbia County, contact Columbia County Public Health at 503-397-7247 or health@columbiacountyor.gov. If you have specific questions about your health or would like medical advice, contact a health care provider.