

Consult your doctor to ensure that this information is right for your child. Information below is for general information and does not constitute medical advice.

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a highly contagious and common viral infection that causes a rash. Chickenpox infections occur year-round, most often during winter and spring. More than 90% of people throughout the world become infected with chickenpox at some point in their lives if they do not receive the chickenpox vaccine.¹ In the United States, chickenpox is largely a disease of children. However, in other countries (particularly tropical countries), chickenpox occurs mainly in adults.

In otherwise healthy children, chickenpox usually is not a serious illness, although its severity can vary from person to person. Chickenpox usually is more severe and more likely to cause complications in pregnant women, newborns, people aged 15 and older, and people who have immune system problems.

Bacterial skin infection is the most common complication in children younger than 5. It can occur after scratching the rash, which allows bacteria from the skin or under fingernails to infect a chickenpox blister. Most skin infections from chickenpox are not serious but require care from a health professional. Other possible complications include a muscle coordination problem (acute cerebellar ataxia) if the virus affects part of the brain. This is a mild illness. Although rare, it is most likely to affect older children.

In adults, the most common complication is varicella pneumonia. About 20 to 30 out of every 10,000 adults who develop varicella require hospitalization.¹

Babies born to women who had chickenpox in the first or early second trimester of pregnancy may develop congenital varicella syndrome, which can cause birth defects such as eye problems or an underdeveloped limb.

You or your child is at risk for chickenpox if you have never had the infection and have not had the chickenpox vaccine. Your risk is especially high if you are exposed to a household member with chickenpox because of the close contact. (Exposure to chickenpox means being around a person who has symptoms of chickenpox or develops them within 2 to 3 days.) In addition, you may develop a more severe case than the person who infected you.

Once you have chickenpox, you are considered immune; you will not have a serious infection again, but you may have a mild infection (called a breakthrough infection). Generally, if the virus becomes active again, it will not result in chickenpox but can cause shingles, or herpes zoster.

What causes chickenpox, and how is it spread?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, a type of herpes virus. It is spread like a cold, entering through your respiratory tract after an infected person sneezes, coughs, or shares food or drinks. Similarly, you can become infected if the virus gets on your hands and you don't wash them before you touch your face. Chickenpox also can spread from skin to skin through open sores.

A person infected with chickenpox can spread the virus before developing any symptoms. Chickenpox is most contagious from 2 to 3 days before the rash develops until all the blisters have crusted over.

What are the symptoms?

The incubation period—the time from exposure to the chickenpox virus until you develop symptoms—is usually 14 to 16 days but can be from 10 to 21 days. You or your child may feel sick and have a fever for 1 or 2 days before the chickenpox rash develops. The most distinctive sign of infection is an itchy rash of red spots and blisters. Some children may have a worse rash and more symptoms than others.

It takes about 1 or 2 days for a chickenpox red spot (macule) to go through all of its stages, including blistering, bursting, drying, and crusting over. New red spots continue to develop every day for as long as 5 to 7 days. Symptoms usually last about 10 days.

Children usually can return to school or day care when they stop developing new red spots.

Other illnesses can have symptoms similar to those of chickenpox. For this reason, you may think you have had chickenpox twice when you have had two different infections.

How is it diagnosed?

A health professional will give you a physical examination and ask questions about your medical history. This usually is enough information for your health professional to diagnose chickenpox.

It may not be necessary for otherwise healthy children with chickenpox symptoms to visit a health professional. You usually know when your child has chickenpox from the distinctive rash. Symptoms usually can be described over the phone for a diagnosis. In addition, avoiding an office visit will reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others. However, discuss with your health professional whether he or she wants to see your child.

Teenagers, adults—especially pregnant women—and anyone with other conditions or illnesses should see a health professional. Call first to make an appointment and to discuss whether you should take any precautions when you

arrive to avoid spreading the infection. For example, office staff may take you directly to an examination room upon your arrival rather than have you wait in the lobby.

How is chickenpox treated?

Most healthy children and adults will need only home treatment for chickenpox. Home treatment includes resting and taking medications to reduce fever and itching. You also can soak in oatmeal baths to reduce itching.

People with long-term (chronic) diseases or other health problems may need additional treatment for chickenpox. This may include a shot of chickenpox antibodies or antiviral medication soon after being exposed to the virus to shorten the length and severity of the disease.

How can I prevent chickenpox?

You can prevent the disease by getting the chickenpox vaccine, which is recommended for most children between 12 and 18 months old. The vaccine also may be given to an older child or adult who has not had chickenpox. Many states now require that children entering day care and school have proof that they are either immune to chickenpox or have had the vaccine. A blood test can determine whether you have immunity against the varicella virus. It is safe to get the chickenpox vaccine even if you are already immune to it, but it is not necessary.

Parents should not intentionally expose children to chickenpox. Some parents hold "chickenpox parties" to expose their children to children who have the illness, believing it is safer for them to have the infection when they are younger than when they are older. This is not a good idea because even young children can have serious (though rare) complications from the infection, including pneumonia or meningitis. Also, it is not possible to know which children will develop complications.

Occasionally chickenpox develops even in people who receive the vaccine. This is called a breakthrough infection. However, if this happens, you will likely develop a mild form of the disease, with few blisters and symptoms.

Although the chickenpox vaccine is a live form of the virus, most children do not have a reaction after receiving it. About 20% have redness or soreness at the injection site, and 3% to 5% develop a chicken pox like rash. If a rash develops, usually it is very mild, with between 2 and 5 sores appearing 5 to 26 days after you receive the vaccine.² However, if your child has a serious or chronic illness, discuss the appropriateness of the chickenpox vaccine with your health professional; these children may have a more severe reaction to the vaccine.

You also may prevent the infection by getting a shot of chickenpox antibodies or the vaccine soon after exposure to the virus.