

## Facts about Chickenpox

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is usually a mild illness in children. Infection in teenagers, adults and those with weakened immune systems can be more severe.

Complications from chickenpox include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain), and bacterial infections of the skin from scratching. Encephalitis can lead to convulsions, deafness or brain damage. About 1 in every 3,000 adults with chickenpox will die from the infection. Unborn babies whose mothers get chickenpox in the middle of the pregnancy may have birth defects.

### Is there a vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine provides protection against chickenpox. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#44b Chickenpox \(Varicella\) Vaccine](#).

### How is chickenpox spread?

The virus spreads easily from person to person through the air when an infected person sneezes or coughs. It can also be spread through contact with the fluid from chickenpox blisters, or the saliva of a person who has chickenpox. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can give it to her baby before birth.

People with chickenpox can spread the virus to others from up to five days *before* and five days *after* the rash appears. They are most contagious from the day before and for the first few days after the rash appears.

To reduce the spread of chickenpox, children with the illness should not attend daycare or school until five days after the rash first appears.

It usually takes two to three weeks for a person to get sick after exposure to the virus. If your child is exposed to chickenpox, watch for signs of the illness for the next two to three weeks.

### What are the symptoms?

At first, a person with chickenpox may have a mild fever, aches, pains, a headache and a loss of appetite. A few days later, a rash appears. Red spots appear first on the face and scalp, and then spread quickly down the body and to the arms and legs. The spots become very itchy and begin to look like blisters, filled with clear fluid. After another few days, the fluid becomes cloudy, the blisters break, and a crust or scab forms while the skin heals. During this time, new "crops" of spots appear, form blisters, and then crust over. Chickenpox usually lasts about 10 days.

### Is there a treatment?

If you have been exposed to the chickenpox virus, your treatment will depend on your age, personal health, and severity of the illness. Most healthy children will only need to stay at home and rest.

Pregnant women, newborn infants, and people with weakened immune systems who have not been vaccinated or have not had chickenpox or shingles in the past should see a doctor **immediately** if they are exposed to, or get, chickenpox.

Prevention methods must be started as soon as possible to reduce the illness, and the risk for complications.

Prevention methods may include a medication called Acyclovir, an injection of Varicella Zoster Immune Globulin (VZIG or VariZIG) or the varicella vaccine.

## Home Treatment

In most cases, chickenpox is a mild illness. If you have chickenpox, you should rest but do not need to stay in bed.

The most helpful things to do are those that make you or your child feel more comfortable. These include:

- Drink lots of liquids such as water, juice and soup, especially if there is a fever. If your baby is breastfeeding, feed your baby more often.
- For a fever, use acetaminophen (Tylenol<sup>®</sup>, Tempra<sup>®</sup>, Atasol<sup>®</sup>) to bring the fever down. ASA or Aspirin<sup>®</sup> should NOT be given to anyone under 20 years of age due to the risk of Reye Syndrome.
- Keep fingernails short and clean, and cover hands with socks at night to prevent scratching.
- Keep the skin cool to relieve itching. Dress lightly and avoid hot baths and showers. Ask your pharmacist or public health nurse about lotions that can reduce the itching.
- Prevent the spread of infection by using a household cleaner to wash any articles soiled with fluid from chickenpox blisters. Keep the infected person away from other family members who have not had chickenpox.

## What are shingles?

The same virus that causes chickenpox causes shingles. For some people, the virus can become active again later in life and cause a painful rash called shingles.

Early symptoms of shingles include headaches, sensitivity to light, and flu-like symptoms without a fever. You may then feel itching, tingling, or extreme pain in the area where a rash develops several days later. It takes two to four weeks for the blisters to heal, although some scars may remain.

A person with shingles who feels well does not need to stay away from work or other activities, *as long as the rash can be completely covered*. A person who has not had chickenpox or the varicella vaccine can get the chickenpox virus from contact with the fluid from the shingles blisters.

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