

# Chickenpox (Varicella)

Fact Sheet

## What is it?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). It is often a mild illness, but may be severe in infants, pregnant women, and persons with weakened immune systems.

Vaccination is the best way to prevent chickenpox; two doses of varicella vaccine are up to 98% effective at preventing disease. All children 12 months and older should receive the vaccine.

## What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox has a characteristic, itchy rash. This rash often starts with pink spots and tiny, fluid-filled blisters ("pox") on the trunk and face that then dry and become scabs 4-5 days later. An infected person may have anywhere from a few to more than 500 pox on their body during the illness.

In total, chickenpox symptoms usually last about 7-10 days. Other symptoms may include:

- ⇒ Fever
- ⇒ Headache
- ⇒ Feeling tired (malaise)

Chickenpox may sometimes result in more severe complications, such as bacterial skin infections, pneumonia, dehydration, and encephalitis.

## How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads easily, primarily when a person touches or inhales the virus particles that come from chickenpox blisters. It can also spread through tiny droplets in the air after someone who has chickenpox breathes, coughs, or sneezes.

Infected persons are contagious 1-2 days before rash onset and until all the pox have formed scabs, usually about 5 days after the start of the rash. Following exposure to chickenpox, symptoms appear 10-21 days later.

## How is chickenpox diagnosed?

Chickenpox is typically diagnosed by the symptoms and the characteristic appearance of the rash. Occasionally, a healthcare provider will use laboratory tests for chickenpox if the diagnosis is unclear or if the illness is severe.

## What should I do if I've been exposed to chickenpox?

Most people develop immunity to chickenpox after having the illness once, or following the receipt of varicella immunizations. If you are immune to chickenpox, you most likely won't become sick.

If you do not have immunity, the varicella vaccine can possibly prevent or reduce the severity of chickenpox if given within 3 –5 days of exposure. Persons at high risk for complications from chickenpox, such as immunocompromised persons, pregnant women, and infants, should contact their healthcare provider immediately if they have been exposed.

**For more information, please contact your health care provider or visit the Center's for Disease Control and Prevention webpage on Chickenpox: <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html>**



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