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What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox causes an itchy, blister-like rash. The same virus that causes chickenpox also causes shingles (herpes zoster). After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in the body in an inactive state. For reasons that are not fully known, the virus can reactivate years later causing shingles.

Who gets chickenpox?

Most cases of chickenpox occur in young, school-aged children. However, the risk of chickenpox is low in people who have gotten two doses of the chickenpox vaccine. For most people, getting chickenpox once provides immunity for life. A person can get chickenpox more than once, but it is uncommon.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease. The virus that causes chickenpox is mainly spread in the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The virus also is spread person to person by directly touching the blisters, saliva or mucus of an infected person. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before the rash begins, until all the chickenpox lesions have crusted (scabbed over). Blisters that are dry and crusted are no longer able to spread the virus.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms of chickenpox may begin as a sudden onset of fever, headache, and feeling tired. An itchy, blister-like rash follows 1-2 days later. The rash may first show up on the chest, back, and face, before it spreads to the rest of the body. It usually takes about 1 week for all the blisters to become scabs.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 14-16 days after exposure to someone with chickenpox or shingles (herpes zoster).

How is chickenpox diagnosed?

Chickenpox is often diagnosed by a healthcare provider who examines the rash and asks questions about the person's medical history. Laboratory testing of samples collected from the blisters is available to confirm chickenpox infection.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

There are steps to take at home to help relieve chickenpox symptoms and prevent skin infections. Using calamine lotion and a cool bath with added baking soda, uncooked oatmeal, or colloidal oatmeal may help ease some of the itching. In children, non-aspirin medications, such as acetaminophen, can help ease fever from chickenpox. Do not use aspirin in children with chickenpox because of the possibility of causing Reye's syndrome. Antiviral medications are available but usually are not necessary.

People with chickenpox should stay home, and away from other people, until all blisters are crusted over.

Do people who have been in contact with someone with chickenpox infection need to be tested and treated?

People exposed to someone infected with chickenpox should be tested for chickenpox if they develop a rash. Anyone exposed who has not completed the two-dose chickenpox vaccine should be vaccinated, ideally within 5 days of the exposure. People at high-risk for complications may be recommended to take additional steps.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

The best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. Everyone should get two doses of chickenpox vaccine if they have never had chickenpox or were never vaccinated. Most people who get the vaccine will not get chickenpox. Talk to a healthcare provider if you have questions about the chickenpox vaccine.

How can I get more information about chickenpox?

- If you have concerns about chickenpox, contact a healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/.
- Visit the CDC Chickenpox page at cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html.

Translations

[Chickenpox Fact Sheet in Arabic](#)

[Chickenpox Fact Sheet in Dari](#)

[Chickenpox Fact Sheet in Haitian Creole](#)

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