

CHICKENPOX

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common illness caused by a virus called varicella-zoster. It is usually mild in children, while adults can become very ill. Chickenpox can be very dangerous for people with immune system problems like leukemia, or for people who are taking drugs that weaken the immune system (such as chemotherapy or steroids).

What are the symptoms?

Chickenpox begins with a fever and tiredness, followed in a day or two by an itchy, red rash. The rash usually appears as red spots starting on the face and body. The spots then become fluid-filled blisters and gradually dry and form scabs in four to five days. Some people may only have a few spots while others may have 500 or more.

How is it spread?

The chickenpox virus is spread very easily, by direct contact with saliva and/or nasal and blister fluid. It may also be spread by coughing or sneezing. A pregnant woman who is sick with chickenpox either before or shortly after birth may pass it to her baby. It takes 10 to 21 days after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox. Children are most contagious from 1 to 2 days before to shortly after onset of the rash. Contagiousness persists until crusting of all lesions.

Is it serious?

Most children will have the illness for 5 to 10 days. About half of all children with chickenpox will visit their healthcare provider due to symptoms such as itching, high fever, dehydration, and headache. Approximately 1 in 10 children suffer complications such as infected skin lesions, dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea, worsening of asthma, or pneumonia. Adults, pregnant women, young infants, adolescents, and those with weakened immune systems (due to illness or drugs such as steroids) are at risk of more serious complications such as bacterial skin, lung, blood and bone infections, viral brain (encephalitis), and lung infections.

Can chickenpox be treated?

Never give aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid – ASA) or any other products containing aspirin to a child with chickenpox. Taking ASA increases the risk of getting Reye's syndrome. This is a severe illness that can damage the liver and the brain. Use acetaminophen (Tylenol®, Tempra®, Panadol®) for fever and pain.

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Skin infections can be prevented by taking good care of the skin and not scratching with fingernails. Luke warm baths, including oatmeal soaks, lightweight clothing and Calamine lotion may help reduce itching. Speak with your healthcare provider about oral medications that can relieve itching.

Do I have to stay home?

If your child is sick enough that he or she is unable to take part in normal activities or if he or she has a fever (greater than 38 degrees C/100.4 degrees F), your child should not attend school or daycare. For mild illness, exclusion is not necessary.

If your child has been in contact with someone who has immune system problems or is taking medications that lower the immune system, you should notify them.

How can I protect my children and myself?

- If you have had chickenpox in the past, you are usually protected for life. Rarely, a person might get a second case of chickenpox.
- If you have never had chickenpox, a vaccine is available. The vaccine is effective in preventing most cases of chickenpox and also reducing the risk of getting complications from chickenpox. It is free of charge for certain groups of people and you can obtain it from KFL&A Public Health or through your healthcare provider.
- Women who are thinking of becoming pregnant and have never had chickenpox should be immunized before becoming pregnant. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox, or have lived in the same house with someone who had chickenpox or shingles, call your doctor right away if you are exposed to chickenpox.
- If you or your child is not yet vaccinated and comes in contact with someone who has chickenpox, you may still be protected if given the vaccine within 3 days and possibly up to 5 days after exposure to a person with chickenpox.
- If you or your child has an immune system disorder, contact your healthcare provider for further information on preventing chickenpox.

For more information, contact KFL&A Public Health at 613-549-1232 or 1-800-267-7875, ext. 1287.