

FACTS ABOUT Chicken Pox

Chickenpox is a very common infection in childhood. It is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, which only infects people. It is most common in children and is usually mild. When adults get it, however, they can be very sick. Most adults have already had chickenpox and will not get it again. Chickenpox is also very dangerous for people with immune system problems like leukemia or for people who are taking steroids.

Chickenpox begins with a fever, followed in a day or two by a rash that can be very itchy. The rash starts with red spots that soon turn into fluid-filled blisters. New blisters may form during the next few days, and after a few days, crusts form over the blisters.

The chickenpox virus spreads very easily through the air or through direct contact with the fluid in a chickenpox blister. Chickenpox is infectious until the last blister has crusted or five days after the rash first appears, whichever is shorter. The only way to stop the spread of the virus from person to person is to prevent infected people from sharing the same room or house, which is not very practical.

Shingles (zoster) looks like chickenpox and is caused by the same virus but is found on only one part of the body. Shingles occurs in people who have already had chickenpox and is very infectious. It is possible to catch chickenpox from someone with shingles but someone cannot get shingles from someone with chickenpox.

Things Parents Can Do

- Watch your child for signs of chickenpox during the next 2 to 3 weeks if another child has it. If your child develops chickenpox, make sure you tell the staff, and contact your physician if you have any questions.
- If your child gets chickenpox, do not give aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid, ASA) or any products that contain aspirin. Taking aspirin increases the risk of getting Reye's syndrome. This severe illness can damage the liver and brain. If you want to control your child's fever, it is safe to use acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- If one of your children has chickenpox, do not try to keep your other children in separate places in the house. It is usually impossible to prevent chickenpox from spreading to other members of the family. If someone else catches the infection, it will appear 2 to 3 weeks after the first family member got it.
- If any child in your household has an immune system disorder, contact your physician. The physician can give that person a special type of immune globulin containing a large number of antibodies (protective substances in the blood) to help prevent infection.
- Adults, and pregnant women in particular, can develop severe chickenpox. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox, or if you have not lived in the same house with someone who has had chickenpox or shingles, call your physician as soon as your child develops chickenpox. Your physician can give you a special type of immune globulin (VZIG) injection to help prevent you from getting a severe infection. If you catch chickenpox early in your pregnancy, there is a very small chance of it damaging your unborn child. If you have chickenpox shortly before or after giving birth, your newborn may develop a very severe infection.
- Keep a child with chickenpox out of the child care facility if the illness is severe enough that the child cannot participate in regular activities or if the child has a fever. For mild cases, exclusion is not necessary.

Adapted from Canadian Paediatric Society "Well Beings"

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