

Health Office Fact Sheet

Chicken Pox



Chicken Pox is a mild and common childhood illness that most children catch at some point.

It causes a rash of red, itchy spots that turn into fluid-filled blisters. They then crust over to form scabs, which eventually drop off.

Some children have only a few spots, but in others they can cover the entire body. The spots are most likely to appear on the face, ears and scalp, under the arms, on the chest and stomach and on the arms and legs.

Chickenpox (medically known as varicella) is caused by a virus called the varicella-zoster virus. It's spread quickly and easily through the coughs and sneezes of someone who is infected.

Chickenpox is most common in children under 10. In fact, chickenpox is so common in childhood that 90% of adults are immune to the condition because they've had it before.

Children usually catch chickenpox in winter and spring, particularly between March and May.

Symptoms

The most commonly recognized chickenpox symptom is a red rash that can cover the entire body.

However, even before the rash appears, you or your child may have some mild flu-like symptoms, including:

- feeling sick
- a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over
- aching, painful muscles
- headache
- generally feeling unwell
- loss of appetite

These flu-like symptoms, especially the fever, tend to be worse in adults than in children.

Chickenpox spots

Soon after the flu-like symptoms, an itchy rash appears. Some children and adults may only have a few spots, but others are covered from head to toe.

The spots normally appear in clusters and tend to be:

- behind the ears
- on the face
- over the scalp
- under the arms
- on the chest and stomach
- on the arms and legs

But the spots can be anywhere on the body, even inside the ears and mouth, on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet and inside the nappy area.

Although the rash starts as small, itchy red spots, after about 12-14 hours the spots develop a blister on top and become intensely itchy.

After a day or two, the fluid in the blisters gets cloudy and they begin to dry out and crust over.

After one to two weeks, the crusting skin will fall off naturally.

New spots can keep appearing in waves for three to five days after the rash begins. Therefore different clusters of spots may be at different stages of blistering or drying out.

Unusual symptoms

Most healthy children (and adults) recover from chickenpox with no lasting ill-effects simply by resting, just as with a cold or flu.

But some children and adults are unlucky and have a more severe bout than usual.

Contact your GP straight away if you or your child develop any abnormal symptoms, for example:

- if the skin surrounding the blisters becomes red and painful
- if you or your child start to get pain in the chest or have difficulty breathing

In these cases, prescription medicine, and possibly hospital treatment, may be needed.

Causes of chickenpox

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. You catch it by coming into contact with someone who is infected with the virus.

It's a very contagious infection. About 90% of people who have not previously had chickenpox will become infected when they come into contact with the virus.

How you catch the virus

The chickenpox virus is spread in the same ways as colds or flu. It's contained in the millions of tiny droplets that come out of the nose and mouth when an infected person sneezes or coughs. You can then become infected with the virus by breathing in these droplets from the air.

You can also become infected by handling a surface or object that these droplets have landed on, then transferring the virus to yourself by touching your face.

It takes seven to 21 days for the symptoms of chickenpox to show after you have come into contact with the virus. This is called the 'incubation period'.

Someone with chickenpox is most infectious from one to two days before the rash appears until all the blisters have crusted over. This usually takes five to six days from the start of the rash.

Shingles

If you have not had chickenpox before, you can also catch chickenpox from someone with shingles (an infection caused by the same virus). However, it's not possible to catch shingles from someone who has chickenpox.

You or your child should not usually need any medical tests to diagnose chickenpox. You can be pretty sure that it is chickenpox if there are the key symptoms of a mild fever followed by an itchy rash, blisters and scabs.

When to contact your GP

1. See your GP if you're not sure whether you or your child have chickenpox.
2. Contact your GP urgently if you have been in contact with someone who has chickenpox or you have chickenpox symptoms and:
 - you are pregnant
 - you have a weakened immune system (the body's defense system)
 - your baby is less than four weeks old

Chickenpox in these instances can cause serious complications if left untreated. It is essential to seek medical advice so that you can receive any necessary treatment.

3. Contact your GP if you have chickenpox and are breastfeeding. They can advise about whether you should continue breastfeeding your baby.

Having a blood test

Once you have contacted your GP, you may need a test to see if you're already immune from chickenpox.

If you have had chickenpox in the past, then it is extremely unlikely that you will develop chickenpox for a second time. If you've never had chickenpox, or you're unsure whether you've had it, then you may need an immunity test.

This is a blood test that checks whether you are producing the antibodies to the chickenpox virus.

If your blood test result shows that you have the antibodies, you'll be naturally protected from the virus. If you don't have the antibodies, then you'll need to be monitored closely to see if you develop chickenpox symptoms. If you do, you may require further treatment.

Treating chickenpox

There is no cure for chickenpox, and the virus usually clears up by itself without any treatment.

However, there are ways of easing the itch and discomfort, and there are important steps you can take to stop the spread.

Painkillers

If your child is in pain or has a fever (high temperature) you can give them a mild painkiller, such as calpol or ibuprofen. These are available over the counter in pharmacies. Always read the manufacturer's instructions.

Ibuprofen can cause problems for some children and adults, so avoid it if you or your child also has:

- asthma
- a history of stomach problems, such as stomach ulcers

If you are unsure whether ibuprofen is suitable, check with your GP or pharmacist for advice. If your child is younger than three months old, always speak to your GP before you give your child any kind of pain relief.

If you're pregnant and need to take painkillers, then paracetamol is the first choice. You can use it at any stage of pregnancy. Only take ibuprofen during the second trimester (weeks 14-27 of the pregnancy).

If you're pregnant and you have chickenpox, you should visit your GP as soon as possible. You may need to have antiviral medicine or immunoglobulin treatment to prevent your symptoms from getting worse.

Keeping hydrated

It is important for children (and adults) with chickenpox to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration. Sugar-free ice-lollies are a good way of getting fluids into children. They also help to soothe a sore mouth that has chickenpox spots in it.

Avoid any food that may make the mouth sore, such as salty foods. Soup is easy to swallow as long as it is not too hot.

Stop the scratching

Chickenpox can be incredibly itchy, but it's important for children (and adults) to not scratch the spots so as to avoid future scarring.

One way of stopping scratching is to keep fingernails clean and short. You can also put socks over your child's hands at night to stop them scratching the rash as they sleep.

If your child's skin is very itchy or sore, try using calamine lotion or cooling gels. These are available in pharmacies and are very safe to use. They have a soothing, cooling effect.

Cool clothing

If your child has a fever, or if their skin is sore and aggravated, dress them appropriately so that they don't get too hot or too cold. Loose-fitting, smooth, cotton fabrics are best and will help stop the skin from becoming sore and irritated.

If your child has chickenpox, avoid sponging them down with cool water. This can make your child too cold, and it may make them shiver.

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Preventing the spread of chickenpox

If your child has chickenpox, inform their school or nursery and keep them at home while they are infectious, which is until the last blister has burst and crusted over. This usually takes five or six days after the rash begins.

If you have chickenpox, stay off work and at home until you're no longer infectious.

If either you or your child has chickenpox, it is also a good idea for you, or them, to avoid contact with:

- pregnant women
- newborn babies

- anyone who has a weak immune system, such as people who are having chemotherapy (a treatment for cancer) or taking steroid tablets

If you or your children have recently been exposed to the chickenpox virus, you may not be able to visit friends or relatives in hospital.

Travelling on a plane

If you or your child has chickenpox, you may not be allowed to fly until six days after the last spot has appeared.

You and your child should be safe to fly once you're past the infectious stage and all of the blisters have crusted over. But it's best to check the policy of your airline first. Inform the airline as soon as chickenpox is diagnosed.

It is also important to let your travel insurer know if you or your child has chickenpox. You need to make sure that you'll be covered if you have to delay or cancel your holiday, or if you need to extend your stay until your child is well enough to fly home.

Stop the virus spreading

Chickenpox can sometimes be spread through contact with objects that have been infected with the virus, such as children's toys, bedding or clothing.

If someone in your household has chickenpox, you can help stop the virus spreading by wiping any objects or surfaces with a sterilizing solution and making sure that any infected clothing or bedding is washed regularly. Good hand washing remain the most effective method in preventing the spread of disease.

Source: www.nhs.uk www.kidshealth.org