

Facts about Chickenpox & Shingles (Varicella)

Chickenpox, once a common infection in children, is now vaccine-preventable. It is caused by the Varicella zoster virus.

Chickenpox begins with a fever, runny nose, cough and muscle ache. A day or two later, a rash appears on the body. The rash starts with itchy, red spots that soon turn into blisters filled with fluid. After a few days a hard cover or crust forms over each blister. Blisters that get infected will scar.

Children with chickenpox can get pneumonia or other serious complications. Necrotizing fasciitis (flesh-eating disease) is an uncommon but serious complication of chickenpox in young children.

Chickenpox can be very serious or even life-threatening to newborn babies, adults and anyone with immune system problems. Be sure to tell the family of a child with immune system problems immediately if there is a case of chickenpox at the school or child care centre.

Chickenpox and pregnancy

Chickenpox can be serious and is preventable. All adult women who have never had chickenpox disease should ask their care provider about the chickenpox vaccine.

There are risks of complications to mother and baby before, during and after pregnancy. If chickenpox happens early in pregnancy, there is a small chance the baby will develop serious birth defects.

A pregnant woman who is not immune to chickenpox should call her doctor right away if she thinks she has been exposed to the virus as Varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG) may be offered to prevent or reduce complications of chickenpox. This shot must be received no later than 96 hours (4 days) after exposure.

Medication for people at high risk of complications

There is a medication for people with a high risk of complications, if they get chickenpox. It is for people over 13 years of age, children over one year of age with chronic skin or lung disorders and children on chronic aspirin treatment. It may also be used with pregnant women and those with immune system problems. This medication must be prescribed by a doctor and given within 24 hours after the rash develops. It is not recommended for healthy children who get chickenpox.

How is Chickenpox Spread?

The virus spreads easily through the air when an infected person breathes, coughs or sneezes. People can also catch chickenpox if they touch the fluid of a chickenpox blister, then touch the mucous membranes of their eyes or nose. It is difficult to stop the spread of chickenpox, because it spreads most easily a day or two before the rash appears. The only way to stop the spread of the virus is to stay away from an infected person. This is usually not possible within a family.



CHICKENPOX is a vaccine-preventable disease

Everyone who has not had chickenpox disease on or after 12 months of age is eligible to receive 2 doses of chickenpox vaccine. Children are routinely offered the vaccine at 12 months and 4 years of age. For children who get exposed and don't yet have immunity, getting the shot 3-5 days after the first contact with chickenpox may minimize or prevent illness.

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What to Do at Home

- If your child is exposed to chickenpox, watch for signs of it for 2 to 3 weeks. Even if your child has had the vaccine, there is a small chance that your child could still catch chickenpox. During this time, stay away from people with immune system problems and from hospitals (except in an emergency).
- If your child gets chickenpox, tell the child care centre or school.
- Children with chickenpox should be kept comfortable:
 - give cool baths
 - keep fingernails short and clean to prevent scratching
 - keep hands clean
 - put socks on child's hands at night to prevent scratching
 - give child plenty to drink
- If anyone in the home has an immune system problem, talk to your doctor immediately.
- Other household members should check that they have had chickenpox in the past and so won't get it again. Anyone 12 months or older who has not had chickenpox disease should get the chickenpox vaccine.

 **Children with chickenpox should not go to the child care centre or school for five days after the beginning of a rash. During this time keep the child away from others in the community as much as possible.**

What is Shingles?

Shingles looks like chickenpox and is caused by the same virus. It usually appears on only one part of the body. Only people who have already had chickenpox can get shingles. You can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles through contact with the fluid from their blisters. You cannot get shingles from someone with chickenpox.



A person with shingles can attend the child care centre or school, as long as they feel well enough and the blisters are completely covered or have crusted over.



SHINGLES is a vaccine-preventable disease for adults

The shingles vaccine is recommended for people 60 years of age and older. However, anyone 50 years of age and older can get the vaccine. Only 1 dose is needed for protection. Speak to your pharmacist or doctor.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol™, Tempra™) or ibuprofen (Advil™, Motrin™) may help reduce a fever and provide some comfort. Always follow the directions on the package about how much and how often to take acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

Never give products containing ASA (acetylsalicylic acid, such as Aspirin™) to anyone under the age of 20 years. Use of ASA products by children can lead to Reye's syndrome, a serious condition affecting the brain and liver.