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INFECTIOUS DISEASES *facts*

Chickenpox – Facts

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a common childhood infection. 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. Once you have had chickenpox, you will not get it again. Chickenpox is also dangerous for people with immune system problems like leukemia (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

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 (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

How is it transmitted?

The chickenpox virus spreads easily through the air or through direct contact with the fluid in a chickenpox blister. Chickenpox is infectious up to five days before to five days after the rash first appears or until all the spots have crusted. 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 practical. Chickenpox cannot be transmitted through indirect contact (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

Is there a chickenpox vaccine?

A vaccine against chickenpox is now available in Canada. It is not yet part of the routine immunization schedule. Individuals who wish to be immunized, at this time, may purchase the vaccine from the pharmacy for their family physician to administer (Health Canada, 2002).

What is shingles?

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 (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

What can parents do?

If your child interacts with a child who has chickenpox, watch your child for signs during the next two to three weeks. If your child develops chickenpox, make sure you tell the child care staff or teacher, 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®, Tempra®, Panadol® and others).

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 two to three weeks after the first family member got it (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

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 (VZIG) containing a large number of antibodies (protective substances in the blood) to help prevent infection (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

Keep a child with chickenpox out of a child care facility or school 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 (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

What if I'm pregnant?

Adults and pregnant women in particular, can develop severe chickenpox. The majority of adult women already have protective antibodies to chickenpox in their blood. 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 (Canadian Paediatric Society, 1999).

For more information please call the Communicable Disease Team in the Barrie Office at (705) 721-7520.

References

Canadian Paediatric Society (1999). Infections with rash. Chickenpox (Varicella-Zoster). In Well beings: A guide to promote the physical health safety and emotional well-being of children in child care centres and family day care homes (2nd ed., pp. 162-164). Ottawa: Canadian Paediatric Society.

Health Canada. (2002). Varicella vaccine. In Canadian immunization guide (6th ed., pp. 223-232, 248-250). Ottawa: Canadian Medical Association.