



Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella zoster virus and is a common childhood infection. 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 or for people who are taking drugs that weaken the immune system, such as steroids (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2011).

What is shingles?

Once you are infected with chickenpox, the virus stays in your body in an inactive form. Later in life the virus can become active again causing shingles (zoster). Shingles is a painful rash that can be serious if it occurs on the face or near the eyes. Nearly 20% of adults who have been infected with chickenpox also get shingles. If you have shingles you can cause people to become infected with chickenpox if they have never been infected before or have never had the chickenpox vaccine. When you are sick with shingles however, you cannot cause others to become ill with shingles.

What are the symptoms?

Chickenpox begins with a fever, respiratory infection and general aches and pains. Approximately two days later, itchy red spots appear and become small fluid-filled blisters that typically heal within five days. Some people may only experience a few blisters; while others can have many blisters over their entire body. Blisters can become infected and in rare cases chickenpox can cause other complications including pneumonia and encephalitis.

How is it transmitted?

Chickenpox spreads easily. It is most contagious on the day before the rash appears and continues until all lesions are crusted over (usually about 5 days). It spreads from person to person through coughing, sneezing and contact with infected saliva or blister fluid. The virus enters the body by the nose or mouth and can also be spread to you through the air if you are near someone with chickenpox who is coughing or sneezing. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can also give it to her baby before birth. Mothers with chickenpox can also give it to their newborn baby after birth (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2011).

Is there a chickenpox vaccine?

Yes. The vaccine is publicly funded (free) in Ontario for all children born after January 2000 and for people in certain high risk groups.

It is routinely given at 15 months of age. Starting in August 2011, a second dose is given as part of a combination vaccine for measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) at 4-6 years of age.

What can parents do?

The best way to protect your children from chickenpox is to have them vaccinated.

If your child is not yet been vaccinated and comes in contact with another child who has chickenpox, he may still be protected if he is vaccinated within three days.

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.

If your child has an immune system disorder, contact your doctor. The doctor can give the child a special type of immune globulin which contains a large number of antibodies to help prevent infection, or he can provide early treatment with an antiviral drug.


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®, Tempa®, Panadol® and others) (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2011).

Call the Communicable Disease Team: ext. 8809



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Your Health Connection



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 as long as they feel well enough to take part in regular activities, even if they still have a rash (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2011).

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, have not had chickenpox and have been around someone with chickenpox or shingles; contact your physician right away. Your physician may want to give you a special type of immune globulin (VZIG) to help prevent you from getting a severe infection. (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2011).

If a woman becomes infected with chickenpox during the first seven months of pregnancy there is a small chance that the fetus may get the virus. In this case, the fetus could get congenital varicella syndrome, which can cause a variety of serious complications. If a pregnant woman becomes ill with chickenpox close to the time of delivery, the baby may become severely ill.

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