

Chickenpox Fact Sheet

- 1. What is chickenpox?** - Chickenpox is an infectious disease caused by the Varicella-Zoster virus which results in a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness and fever. The rash appears first on the trunk and face, but can spread over the entire body causing from 250 to 500 itchy blisters. Prior to the common use of the Varicella vaccine, most cases of chickenpox occurred in persons younger than 15 years old and the disease had annual cycles, peaking in the spring of each year.
- 2. How do you get chickenpox?** Chickenpox is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact or through the air from an infected person's coughing or sneezing. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes from 10 to 21 days after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox.
- 3. Can Chickenpox be prevented?** Yes, vaccination with recommended two doses of Varicella vaccine prevents chickenpox in most people.
- 4. Can you get chickenpox if you've been vaccinated?** Yes. Approximately 15 to 20% of people, who have received one dose of Varicella vaccine, still get chickenpox if they are exposed, but their disease is usually milder: e.g. vaccinated persons who get chickenpox typically have fewer than 50 spots or bumps, which may resemble bug bites more than large blisters.
- 5. What is the chickenpox illness like?** In unvaccinated children, chickenpox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5 to 10 days. Children usually miss 5 or 6 days of school or childcare due to their chickenpox and have symptoms such as high fever, severe itching, an uncomfortable rash, and dehydration or headache. About one unvaccinated child in 10 has a complication from chickenpox serious enough to visit a health care provider including infected skin lesions, other infections, and dehydration from vomiting or diarrhea, asthma attacks or more serious complications such as pneumonia. Certain groups of persons are more likely to have more serious illness with complications. These include adults, infants, adolescents and people with weak immune systems from either illnesses or from medications such as long-term steroids.
- 6. What are the serious complications from chickenpox?** Serious complications from chickenpox include bacterial infections which can involve many sites of the body including the skin, tissues under the skin, bone, lungs (pneumonia), joints and the blood. Other serious complications are due directly to the virus infection and include viral pneumonia, bleeding problems and infection of the brain (encephalitis).



7. **Can a healthy person with chickenpox die from the disease?** – Yes. Before a vaccine was available, there were approximately 11,000 hospitalizations and 100 deaths (50 in children and 50 in adults) from chickenpox in the United States every year. Many of the deaths and complications from chickenpox occurred in previously healthy children and adults. Some deaths continue to occur in healthy, unvaccinated children and adults.
8. **Can you get chickenpox more than once?** - Yes, but this occurs uncommonly. For most people, one infection is thought to produce lifelong immunity.
9. **If chickenpox in children is usually not serious, why not let children get the disease?** It is not possible to predict who will have a mild case of chickenpox and who will have a serious or even deadly case of the disease. Now that there is a safe and effective vaccine, it is just not worth taking the chance.
10. **For more information about Chickenpox:** <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/varicella/dis-faqs-gen.htm>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information.



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Prevention & Treatment

Español: [Prevención y tratamiento \(/chickenpox/about/prevention-treatment-sp.html\)](/chickenpox/about/prevention-treatment-sp.html)

Prevention

The best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. Children, adolescents, and adults should have two doses of chickenpox vaccine.

Chickenpox vaccine is very safe and effective at preventing the disease. Most people who get the vaccine will not get chickenpox. If a vaccinated person does get chickenpox, it is usually mild—with fewer blisters and mild or no fever. The chickenpox vaccine prevents almost all cases of severe disease.

For more information about chickenpox vaccine, see [Vaccination \(/chickenpox/vaccination.html\)](/chickenpox/vaccination.html).

For people exposed to chickenpox, call a health care provider if the person

- has never had chickenpox disease and is not vaccinated with the chickenpox vaccine
- has a weakened immune system caused by disease or medication; for example,
 - People with HIV/AIDS or cancer
 - Patients who have had transplants, and
 - People on chemotherapy, immunosuppressive medications, or long-term use of steroids
- is pregnant

Treatments at Home for People with Chickenpox

There are several things that can be done at home to help relieve the symptoms and prevent skin infections. Calamine lotion and colloidal oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching. Keeping fingernails trimmed short may help prevent skin infections caused by scratching blisters.

Over-the-counter Medications

Use non-aspirin medications, such as acetaminophen, to relieve fever from chickenpox.

Do not use aspirin or aspirin-containing products to relieve fever from chickenpox. The use of aspirin in children with chickenpox has been associated with Reye's syndrome, a severe disease that affects the liver and brain and can cause death.



When to Call the Health Care Provider

For people with chickenpox at risk of serious complications, call a health care provider if the person

- is older than 12 years of age
- has a weakened immune system
- is pregnant
- develops any of the following:
 - fever that lasts longer than 4 days
 - fever that rises above 102°F (38.9°C)
 - any areas of the rash or any part of the body becomes very red, warm, or tender, or begins leaking pus (thick, discolored fluid), since these symptoms may indicate a bacterial infection
 - extreme illness
 - difficult waking up or confused demeanor
 - difficulty walking
 - stiff neck
 - frequent vomiting
 - difficulty breathing
 - severe cough

Treatments Prescribed by Your Doctor for People with Chickenpox

Your health care provider can advise you on treatment options. Antiviral medications are recommended for people with chickenpox who are more likely to develop serious disease including

- otherwise healthy people older than 12 years of age
- people with chronic skin or lung disease
- people receiving steroid therapy
- some groups of pregnant women

Acyclovir, an antiviral medication, is licensed for treatment of chickenpox. For more information, see [Acyclovir Treatment \(/chickenpox/hcp/persons-risk.html#acyclovir\)](/chickenpox/hcp/persons-risk.html#acyclovir). Other antiviral medications that may also work against chickenpox include valacyclovir and famciclovir.

Related Pages

- [Acyclovir Treatment \(/chickenpox/hcp/persons-risk.html#acyclovir\)](/chickenpox/hcp/persons-risk.html#acyclovir)

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