



## **Chickenpox (Varicella) Fact Sheet**

### **What is chickenpox?**

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV), a member of the herpes virus family.

### **How does chickenpox spread?**

The disease spreads mainly through close contact with someone who has chickenpox or shingles to others who have never had the disease or never been vaccinated. For example, it can spread when a person touches or breathes in the virus particles that come from the blisters when they get scratched.

### **What are the symptoms of chickenpox?**

Initial symptoms include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, headache. A rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters soon follows. It spreads over the whole body and may appear on the scalp, armpits, trunk, eyelids, and mouth. The blisters will eventually dry, crust over, and form scabs.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms commonly appear between usually 14-16 days after exposure to someone with a chickenpox or shingles (herpes zoster) rash, with a range of 10-21 days. Symptoms usually last about a week.

### **When and for how long is a person able to spread chickenpox?**

Chickenpox can spread 1 to 2 days before an infected person gets the rash, and then doesn't stop spreading until all the blisters have formed scabs. Vaccinated people who develop breakthrough chickenpox may develop lesions that do not form scabs. These people are considered contagious until no new lesions have appeared for 24 hours.

### **Does past infection with chickenpox make a person immune?**

Infection generally results in lifelong immunity. After chickenpox, the virus remains in the body (dormant). People can get shingles when the virus reactivates in their body after they have already had chickenpox. CDC recommends two doses of recombinant zoster vaccine (RZV, Shingrix) to prevent shingles and related complications in adults 50 years and older. Shingrix is also recommended for adults 19 years and older who have weakened immune systems because of disease or therapy. For more information about this vaccine, visit the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) shingles website](#).

### **Is chickenpox serious?**

In some cases, chickenpox can cause serious problems such as skin infections, dehydration (loss of body fluid), pneumonia (an infection in the lungs), encephalitis (swelling of the brain), and rarely it may lead to death. Newborn children whose mothers are not immune and persons with weakened immune systems are at risk for complications. To learn more about possible serious health problems, visit the [CDC's chickenpox website](#).

### **Is there a vaccine to prevent chickenpox?**

CDC recommends two doses of chickenpox vaccine for children, adolescents, and adults who have never had chickenpox and were never vaccinated. In children, the first dose is recommended at 12 and 15 months old, and the second dose is recommended at 4 through 6 years old. The State of Alaska requires two doses of vaccine for entry into grades K-6. See [State of Alaska Child Care & School Immunization Requirements](#)

### **What should I do if I suspect my child has chickenpox?**

Individuals with suspected chickenpox should contact their health care provider. They can advise you on treatment options.

### **What can be done to prevent the spread of chickenpox?**

Infectious persons should isolate and be excluded from school, work, or other public places until all lesions become dry and crusted over (usually after 5 days in non-immunized persons). Such persons should avoid contact with pregnant persons, babies, children, and people with weakened immune systems.

### **Can my vaccinated child still get chickenpox (breakthrough chickenpox)?**

Some people who have been vaccinated against chickenpox can still get the disease. However, they usually have milder symptoms with fewer or no blisters (or just red spots), a mild or no fever, and are sick for a shorter period of time than people who are not vaccinated. But some vaccinated people who get chickenpox may have disease similar to unvaccinated people.

### **Is there a treatment for chickenpox?**

There are several things that you can do at home to help relieve chickenpox symptoms and prevent skin infections. Calamine lotion and a cool bath with added baking soda, uncooked oatmeal, or colloidal oatmeal may help relieve some of the itching. Try to keep fingernails trimmed short and minimize scratching to prevent the virus from spreading to others and to help prevent skin infections. If you do scratch a blister by accident, wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

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. Instead, use non-aspirin medications, such as acetaminophen, to relieve fever from chickenpox. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends avoiding treatment with ibuprofen if possible because it has been associated with life-threatening bacterial skin infections.

### **I have heard about "chickenpox parties" to give everyone the disease so they have natural immunity. Is this a good idea?**

In the past, some parents participated in "chickenpox parties" to intentionally expose their unvaccinated children to a child with chickenpox in hopes that they would get the disease. Public health experts strongly recommend against hosting or participating in these events. Chickenpox can be serious and can lead to severe complications and death, even in health children. There is no way to tell in advance how severe one's symptoms may be. For more information, visit the [CDC varicella website](#).

### **Where can I go for more information?**

Visit the [Alaska Division of Public Health varicella website](#) or the CDC's [Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases, a.k.a. "The Pink Book,"](#) for detailed information.