



CHICKENPOX FACT SHEET

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious viral illness caused by the herpes zoster virus (also called the Varicella-Zoster virus).

What are the symptoms?

Chickenpox is an acute illness that usually begins with a sudden onset of fever, runny nose, cough and tiredness. About one to two days later a rash begins, starting as pink blotches that rapidly progress to blisters. The blisters can be very itchy and last four to six days before turning into scabs and drying out. The rash is usually more concentrated over the trunk, face and scalp. The rash can occur in different stages at any one time, new blisters may be forming at the same time as old blisters are forming scabs.

Who does chickenpox affect?

In healthy children chickenpox is usually a mild illness of short duration. Although children can become ill enough to be hospitalised, death is rare. The chickenpox rash is very itchy and scratching can sometimes cause scarring or introduce bacterial infections into the blisters, which is the most common complication in healthy children. Adults can also become infected. Adults usually develop a more serious illness than children. People who may be at higher risk of developing severe chickenpox with life threatening complications such as pneumonia and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) include:

- People on medication that suppresses the immune system, or people who have a serious medical condition that affects the immune system, such as cancer;
- Babies born very prematurely (before 28 weeks gestation) who are still in hospital when exposed;
- Newborn babies in the first month of life whose mother is not immune to chickenpox;
- Non-immune pregnant women. Rarely, chickenpox can cause stillbirths and birth defects in babies born to women infected during pregnancy.

People who may be at higher risk of developing severe chickenpox should seek medical advice if exposed.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is very easily spread from one person to another by coughing or sneezing, or by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat. Direct contact with the fluid in the blisters can also spread chickenpox to other people.

When does a person become ill?

A person who has been in contact with a case of chickenpox may start to develop symptoms between 10 and 21 days after exposure.

How common is chickenpox?

By the age of 12 years, it is estimated 75 percent of children will have had chickenpox. This increases to at least 95% by young adulthood.

In Australia there are about 240,000 cases of chickenpox every year, of which 1,500 need hospitalisation and about 7 people die. This pattern may change over the next few years as a result of childhood immunisation against chicken pox.

Is there a vaccination for chickenpox?

There is a vaccine available against chickenpox. The vaccine is a live weakened form of the virus, which is well tolerated in most people.

For Children – A single injection at 18 months of age was included as part of the National Immunisation Program from 1 November 2005. A 'catch-up' dose for adolescents at 10-13 years of age is also recommended for those who have not been vaccinated, or who have not had chickenpox. In the ACT, this is provided to year 7 in high school.

For Adults - The vaccine is recommended for **non-immune** adults who are:

- health-care workers, teachers and workers in childcare centres;
- women prior to pregnancy (the vaccine should not be given during pregnancy and women should not become pregnant for one month following vaccination);
- parents of young children;
- household contacts of an immunosuppressed person.

The vaccine is available on private prescription for those not eligible for free vaccine.

Are there side effects from the immunisation?

The chickenpox vaccine is generally well tolerated and side effects are generally mild. Side effects may include:

- redness, swelling and soreness at the injection site;
- mild temperature;
- a mild chickenpox like rash may develop up to six weeks after the immunisation (this rash is usually only a few spots but should be considered infectious until scabbed over).

How can the spread of chickenpox be prevented?

A person with chickenpox is usually infectious from one to two days before the rash appears until all the blisters have formed dry scabs. A person with chickenpox should be excluded from school, childcare or work for at least five days after the rash first appears AND until all the blisters have scabbed over.

Tissues used to wipe an infected person's nose must be disposed of properly, eg, placed in a closed rubbish bin. Carers of a person with chickenpox should wash their hands thoroughly after contact with the blisters or soiled articles. A person with chickenpox should not share utensils, food or drinking cups with a person whilst they are infectious.

The chickenpox vaccine has been shown to be effective in preventing infection following exposure for some people. This is usually successful if the vaccine is given within three days, and possibly up to five days after exposure to chickenpox.

People who are at a higher risk of developing severe disease or complications from chickenpox may need to have Varicella-zoster immunoglobulin (ZIG). People who may be recommended to have ZIG include immunocompromised individuals, non-immune pregnant women, newborn babies less than one month of age and babies born very prematurely who are exposed while still in hospital. ZIG may prevent or modify disease if given early, ideally within 96 hours of exposure.

Please see your doctor or contact the Communicable Disease Control section for advice about preventing chickenpox after being exposed.

Is shingles like chickenpox?

People who have had chickenpox rarely get it twice. However the chickenpox virus can lie dormant in the body and may 'reactivate' many years in the future as shingles. Shingles will only occur in people who have had chickenpox previously or been vaccinated, although the risk is much less in the vaccinated population. It is extremely rare for the vaccine strain of the virus to reactivate in vaccine recipients and cause shingles.

Shingles causes groups of painful blisters. These blisters are usually only on one side or area of the body. The symptoms can persist for three to five weeks. The virus can be spread to other people by contact with the blisters and can cause chickenpox in a non-immune person.

Need more information?

For more information about chickenpox, contact your doctor or phone the Health Protection Service Communicable Disease Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Varicella is a notifiable disease. Cases notified ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers

Acknowledgement: Heymann, D L, 2004, Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 18th edition. Department of Human Services, Victoria, 1997, The Blue Book - guidelines for the Control of Infectious Diseases. NHMRC, 2008, The Australian Immunisation Handbook, 9th edition.

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| ENGLISH | If you need interpreting help, telephone: |
| ARABIC | إذا احتجبت لمساعدة في الترجمة الشفوية، إتصل برقم الهاتف: |
| CHINESE | 如果你需要传译员的帮助，请打电话: |
| CROATIAN | Ako trebate pomoć tumača telefonirajte: |
| GREEK | Αν χρειάζεστε διερμηνέα τηλεφωνήστε στο |
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