

CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA) FACT SHEET

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox disease (varicella) is an acute, highly contagious, generalized viral disease. It is common in childhood but can also cause illness in adolescents and adults.

If you have already had chickenpox, you are probably immune. This means that your body can fight off the infection and you will likely not get chickenpox.

After infection, the virus stays in your body for life. The virus can later cause shingles, which causes a painful, blistering rash on one part of the body.

What are the signs and symptoms of Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an illness that usually begins with a slight fever, fatigue, headache, and/or runny nose. This is followed in a day or two by a red, spotty rash that becomes small, itchy, fluid-filled blisters. Eventually the blisters dry up and crust over.

Adolescents and adults are more likely to have complications from chickenpox than children. People who are immunocompromised are especially at risk for complications. Possible complications are pneumonia, and inflammation of the kidneys, heart or joints. The nervous system may be affected causing inflammation of the brain.

How is Chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person-to-person by respiratory droplets in the air or direct contact with the blister fluid. The disease is most contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears. Chickenpox is infectious until the last blister has crusted (usually about five days after the rash first appears). Symptoms usually

occur 10-21 days after contact with an infected person.

Chickenpox may cause stillbirths or birth defects if a woman contracts the disease during the first two trimesters of pregnancy. It can spread to the baby during childbirth.

How do I know if I have Chickenpox?

Your doctor will review your signs and symptoms and examine you. They also test by taking a sample of the fluid of a blister. If you are pregnant and think you have been exposed to chickenpox, you may have a blood test to determine whether or not you are immune.

What can you do if you or your child has Chickenpox?

- Use calamine lotion to help relieve itching.
- Put an ice pack or cool moist washcloth on itchy areas for 20 to 30 minutes.
- If the itching is severe or making it difficult to sleep, take a non-prescription antihistamine such as Benadryl™.
- Wash your hands often to prevent infection.
- Take a non-prescription pain reliever such as acetaminophen to relieve a headache, fever or general aches and pains. **Do not give Aspirin™ or any products that contain acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) to a child under the age of 18.**
- Stay at home if you have a fever.

When can my child go back to school?

It is recommended that a child with mild chickenpox does not need to stay home from school or daycare if he/she is feeling well enough to participate normally. Since chickenpox is most contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears, isolation after a rash appears is not effective for preventing transmission.

For further information, talk to your health care professional or call Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.

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Can Chickenpox be prevented?

Immunization provides the best protection against chickenpox. The vaccine is recommended for healthy individuals who have not yet had the disease.

Two doses of the vaccine are recommended for children in Ontario and people who have not had chickenpox. The first dose is given at 15 months of age. The second dose is given either as varicella alone or a combined MMR-V (measles, mumps, rubella and varicella or chickenpox) vaccine at 4-6 years of age; before starting school. Children who are born on or after January 1, 2000 are eligible to receive two doses of varicella vaccine for free.

If you are exposed to chickenpox and you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine, your doctor may give you an injection of Varicella-Zoster immune globulin to help prevent the disease.