

Let's Talk About...

Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a very contagious infection caused by the varicella virus. It causes an itchy red rash all over the body. The child with chickenpox can feel very achy and sick, like the flu. It is very common in children. People with chickenpox are infectious (able to give it to someone else) 1–2 days before the rash appears. They stay infectious until the small blisters dry up.

Chickenpox virus travels through the air when an infectious person coughs, sneezes, or blows their nose. About 2 weeks (10–21 days) after the virus is breathed in, the illness starts. Chickenpox can happen at any age but is seen most often in children younger than 10 years of age.

How do you prevent chickenpox?

All children between 12 and 18 months of age who have not been sick with chickenpox should have the chickenpox vaccine (varicella vaccine). Your child should also have a second chickenpox vaccine at 4–6 years of age. If your child has not had chickenpox and has not received 2 chickenpox vaccines, talk to your child's healthcare provider about getting these vaccines.

The chickenpox vaccine prevents chickenpox more than 9 times out of 10. If a child receives the chickenpox vaccine and they get sick with chickenpox, they are usually not as sick. They get fewer blisters, have lower fevers, and get better much faster.

Most children have no side effects from the vaccine. If side effects happen, they are usually mild and are gone quickly. Common reactions to the vaccine are:

- Soreness, swelling, redness, or stiffness where the shot was given
- The child could be tired and could be fussy
- Mild rash where the shot was given or somewhere else on the body up to one month after the vaccine

What does chickenpox look like?

People with chickenpox have a rash of small blisters all over the body. The blisters are “weepy” at first. They may look like drops of water. After 24 hours, they start to dry up and form scabs. The rash can be

anywhere on the body. Itching is common. Your child may be fussy during the day and restless at night. Your child may have a mild sore throat and the lymph nodes (glands) on the neck may swell. Fever is common and your child may not be hungry. As the last blisters scab over, your child's fever will fall. When this happens your child should begin feeling better. Illness usually lasts from 5–7 days.

How do I take care of my child's skin?

Have your child take daily baths in lukewarm water. This will soothe the itching. Add oatmeal or baking soda (½ cup) to the tub water. This will help clean your child's skin and reduce the chance of infection from scratching.

- Apply calamine lotion or a baking soda paste to the blisters.
- Keep your child's hands clean and fingernails short. Put socks or mittens on their hands to reduce scratching, especially at night.
- Encourage your child to drink extra amounts of favorite juices or water. Do this especially if your child has a fever.
- Your child may return to school or daycare when all the blisters have dried up. This is usually 5–7 days after the rash began.

Are there any recommended medicines?

Antihistamine (ant-eye-HIST-a-mein) medicine can reduce itching. It can also help your child fall asleep if fussy and anxious.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can be given for a temperature over 101°F (38.3°C).

Do **not** give aspirin to your child with chickenpox (or any virus) since it can lead to a serious brain, liver, and kidney disease called Reye's syndrome. Read the label on all medicines to make sure they do not contain aspirin. Alka-Seltzer® and other medicines contain aspirin.

There is an anti-viral medicine called Acyclovir® (ay-sye-kloe-veer). If a child receives this medicine within 24 hours of when the blisters appear, it may help decrease the days of fever and number of blisters. Acyclovir® is recommended for household members too, especially teens and adults who did not have chickenpox as a child. Discuss this treatment option with your family or child's doctor or healthcare provider. They have to order this medicine.

Are there any special precautions?

Chickenpox blisters can become infected from scratching with dirty fingernails. Infected sores may leave a permanent scar.

Chickenpox can be extremely serious for people with poor immune systems, such as persons with cancer, or receiving chemotherapy or steroid medicines. If your child has any of these or if someone with one of these conditions has been exposed to your child, discuss this with your doctor or healthcare provider right away.

When should I call my child's doctor or healthcare provider?

Call your child's healthcare provider immediately if your child has any of the following:

- Vomits for more than 4 hours
- Very sleepy or less alert
- Trouble walking
- A severe cough, short of breath or chest pain
- Severe stomach ache
- A temperature more than 104°F (40°C)

You may want to talk to the doctor or healthcare provider if your child has the following:

- Unusual redness, swelling, or pain over the rash
- A fever for more than 7 days
- Blisters that erupt after 7 days

What happens if my child is admitted to the hospital?

If admitted to the hospital, your child may need:

- An IV (eye-vee) or intravenous (in-trah-VEE-nuss). It is a tiny, flexible tube inserted into a vein to help get enough liquids.
- Medication to help reduce the itching and fever.
- Oxygen, usually with a nasal cannula (a small tube that sits under your child's nose that blows a little oxygen into each nostril).

Your child may have to have secretions sucked out of his nose. This is done with a small tube (catheter) put into the nose every once in a while. This clears out secretions and can help your child breathe better.

Why do my child's healthcare providers need to wear a mask, gloves, and gown?

During your child's stay in the hospital, a airborne and contact precaution sign will be placed on the room door. Please see example of the sign.

This requires all hospital staff to wear a mask, gown, and gloves every time they enter your child's room. This protects the hospital staff from getting the virus and possibly spreading it to other patients because chickenpox is highly contagious.

When it is time for your child to leave the hospital the nurse will also follow these precautions. The nurse will put a mask on your child for transport out to your car.



What are the possible complications from chickenpox?

- Bacterial skin infections on the blisters
- Pneumonia
- Encephalitis (infection of brain tissue)
- Reye's syndrome

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