

Let's Talk About...

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox and how is it spread?

Chickenpox is an infection that is caused by the varicella [vair-eh-SEL-uh] virus. It spreads easily when a person who is infected coughs, sneezes, or blows their nose. The main symptom of chickenpox is an itchy red rash all over your child's body. They can feel very achy and sick.

Children can get chickenpox at any age, but those younger than 10 years old get it more often. It can be very serious for children with a weak immune system, such as those who have cancer or are getting chemotherapy, and those who take steroid medicines. If someone with one of these conditions has been around your infected child, they should call their healthcare provider right away.

What are the signs and symptoms of chickenpox?

The most common sign of chickenpox is small blisters all over your child's body. The blisters are "weepy" at first and may look like drops of water. After 24 hours, they start to dry up and form scabs. The rash can be anywhere on their body.

Other signs and symptoms may include:

- Itchiness
- Fever
- Fussiness or restlessness
- Mild sore throat
- Swollen glands in their neck

When the last blisters scab over, your child's fever will go away. When this happens, your child should begin feeling better. They may be sick for 5 to 7 days.



What can I do to help my child feel better?

Have your child take a bath every day in warm (not hot) water. This will make them less itchy. Add ½ cup of uncooked oatmeal or baking soda to the tub water. This helps clean your child's skin and reduces the chance of infection from scratching.

Other treatments you can do at home include:

- Putting calamine [KAL-uh-mine] lotion or a baking soda paste on the blisters to help itchiness.
- Keeping your child's hands clean and fingernails short. Put socks or mittens on their hands to reduce scratching, especially at night. Chickenpox blisters can become infected from scratching with dirty fingernails. Infected sores may leave a permanent scar.
- Having your child drink extra liquid, such as water, Pedialyte, or a mix of water and a sports drink. Do this especially if your child has a fever.

Your child may return to school or daycare when all the blisters have dried up or when your doctor says it's okay. A child with active chickenpox blisters can pass it on to others.

What medications are used to treat chickenpox?

A number of medications may be recommended to treat your child's chickenpox. Always ask your child's doctor about which ones are right for your child.

Medications include:

- **Antihistamines** [an-tee-HISD-tuh-meenz] can make your child feel less itchy and help your child fall asleep if they are fussy or anxious.
- **Acetaminophen** [ah-seet-ah-MIN-uh-fen] (Tylenol or others) can help reduce a fever (101°F or 38.3°C or higher).

Do not give aspirin (also called salicylate) to a child for chickenpox or any other sickness. In children, aspirin can cause a serious brain, liver, and kidney disease called Reye's [REYZ] syndrome. Read the label on all medicines to make sure they do not have aspirin.

- **Acyclovir** [ay-SYE-kloe-veer] is an antiviral medication that may help decrease the number of days your child has a fever and the number of blisters your child gets if they take it within 24 hours of the blisters starting. Your child's healthcare provider must order this medication for your child. Acyclovir might be recommended for other members of your family who are exposed to the virus, especially teens and adults who did not have chickenpox as a child.

When should I call my child's doctor?

Call your child's healthcare provider right away if your child has:

- Vomiting (throwing up) for more than 4 hours
- Unusual sleepiness or seems less alert
- Trouble walking
- A severe cough, shortness of breath, or chest pain
- Severe stomachache
- A temperature more than 104°F (40°C)

You may want to talk to your child's healthcare provider if your child has the following:

- Unusual redness, swelling, or pain over the rash
- A fever for more than 7 days
- New blisters that appear 7 days after the first blisters started

When might my child need to go to the hospital?

A child with chickenpox may need to go to the hospital for care. In the hospital, they might get:

- An IV [eye-vee] or intravenous [in-trah-VEE-nuss] catheter. This is a tiny, flexible tube that goes inside a vein to help your child get liquids.
- Medicine to help reduce the itchiness and fever.
- Oxygen, usually with a nasal cannula [KAN-yuh-luh] (a small tube that sits under your child's nose and blows oxygen into their nose).
- Mucus sucked out of their nose to help them breathe better. This is done with a small tube (catheter).

If your child has a severe case of chickenpox, they might also get:

- Skin infections on the blisters
- Pneumonia [noo-MOHN-yuh], a lung infection
- Encephalitis [en-sef-uh-LIE-tus], an infection of brain tissue
- Reye's syndrome

Because chickenpox spreads easily, healthcare providers who work in the hospital must follow certain precautions when they take care of a child with chickenpox. This includes wearing a mask, gown, and gloves every time they enter your child's room. This protects the staff from getting the virus and spreading it to other patients. Your child will wear a mask as they leave the hospital to protect staff and visitors.

