

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious viral infection caused by the **varicella** [var-uh-SEL-uh] virus. Because of the chickenpox vaccine, the disease is now much less common. Typically, it is a relatively mild disease that affects children under 10. Although rare, it is possible to get chickenpox more than once.

What are the symptoms?

The disease causes a rash, starting as little red bumps on the chest, scalp, stomach, back, and later on the face. There can often be hundreds of spots that appear over the next 3 to 5 days. These bumps become small, fluid-filled blisters that break and then crust over. Early symptoms (1 to 2 days before the rash begins) include fever, headache, loss of appetite, stomach ache, and tiredness. This early phase of the infection is when people are most contagious.

Who is at risk of getting chickenpox?

The chickenpox virus is spread in the droplets from an infected person's breath, sneezes, or coughs as well as from the blisters on their skin. People more at risk include:

- Someone who has never had chickenpox or has not been vaccinated
- Those who work in or attend a school or child care facility
- Anyone with children living in their home
- A playmate of an infected child (especially during indoor play)
- A newborn infant whose mother had chickenpox **within 5 days before or 48 hours after delivery**

Once you have been exposed to chickenpox, it may take a couple of weeks for you to have any symptoms.



Chicken Pox and Pregnancy

If you are pregnant:

- **Talk to your doctor right away** if you have been exposed to chickenpox. You could be at risk for some complications.
- **DO NOT have a chickenpox vaccine.**
- **Protect your baby.** If you have chickenpox within the 5 days before or 48 hours after delivery, your baby could get the virus and be at risk for serious, life-threatening complications. Ask your doctor about medicine to lower these risks.

Can having chickenpox be serious?

Although typically a mild illness, serious and even life-threatening complications can occur including:

- **Bacterial infections**
- **Dehydration**
- **Pneumonia**
- **Reye's syndrome**, a rare condition that causes swelling in the brain and liver
- **Encephalitis** [en-sef-uh-LAHY-tis], which is inflammation of the brain
- **Toxic shock syndrome**, which is a rare complication of certain bacterial infections
- **Shingles**, which can occur many years later in older adults or those with weakened immune systems

People most at risk for serious complications are:

- **Adults, especially pregnant women** who have not previously had the disease
- **Newborns and infants** (if the mother has neither had the disease nor been vaccinated)
- **People with weakened immune systems** (such as those with HIV, on chemotherapy, or taking medicine to alter how the immune system works)

How is chickenpox treated?

Treatment usually involves trying to reduce itching by using drying lotion on the rash (such as Caladryl) or taking an antihistamine (such as oral Benadryl). In children, it is very important to **only use one or the other, not both**. It also helps to trim fingernails to reduce the damage done by scratching. Taking baths every day will also reduce the possibility of getting a secondary bacterial infection.

Sometimes, a doctor may prescribe a medicine called **acyclovir** [ey-SAHY-kloh-veer] within 24 hours of the rash appearing. This helps make the symptoms less severe but typically is not used unless there are complications or the person is at risk of complications.

Do not give aspirin or ibuprofen to someone with chickenpox because these increase the risk of developing Reye's syndrome, a serious complication.

Can chickenpox be prevented?

The best way to prevent getting chickenpox is to **get vaccinated**. It is part of a child's regular vaccine schedule, usually given at 12 to 15 months of age. This vaccine will typically prevent the disease or at least make the illness very mild. Even getting the vaccine right after being exposed can make the disease less severe.

A key way to prevent the spread is to **NOT** allow anyone with chickenpox to return to school or work (or socialize with others) until all blisters have crusted over or dried out.

If the infected person has to be hospitalized, the hospital will take precautions such as:

- Using only private rooms and keeping the patient's room door closed
- Requiring anyone entering the room, as well as any patient leaving their room, to wear a mask for 2 days before and 5 days after the rash appears
- Ensuring that all healthcare providers also wear gloves as well as a gown over their clothing



When should I call a doctor?

If you think you or your child has chickenpox, let your doctor know and make an appointment.

Call your doctor's office right away if the person with chickenpox experiences ANY of the following complications:

- A rash that spreads to one or both eyes
- Bumps or blisters that become very red, warm, or tender (signaling a possible secondary bacterial infection)
- Dizziness or feeling disoriented
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Tremors or loss of muscle coordination
- A worsening cough
- Vomiting
- Stiff neck
- Fever higher than 102° F (38.9° C)



Questions for my doctor:

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