

# Chickenpox

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*This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment*

## **What is chickenpox?**

Chickenpox is a common illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Most people are first exposed to chickenpox during early childhood. Chickenpox is usually a mild disease, particularly in children. The illness can be more severe if it occurs in teenagers, adults, or individuals with a weakened immune system.

## **What are the symptoms?**

At first, a person with chickenpox may have a low fever, aches and pains, a headache and a loss of appetite. A few days later, a rash appears. Red spots appear first on the face and scalp, and then spread quickly down the body and to the arms and legs.

The spots become very itchy and begin to look like blisters, filled with clear fluid. After another few days, the fluid becomes cloudy, the blisters break, and a crust or scab forms while the skin heals. During this same time, new "crops" of spots appear, form blisters, and then crust over. The chickenpox illness usually lasts about 10 days. Some people may have more severe symptoms than others, including a high fever, feel very tired, and have a worse rash with many blisters - some in the mouth or ears, on the eyelids or other parts of the body.

## **How is chickenpox spread?**

The chickenpox virus spreads very easily from person to person.

- It can spread through the air when someone with chickenpox coughs or sneezes.
- It can be spread if you touch the fluid from the chickenpox blisters, or the saliva of a person who has chickenpox. The virus can get into your nose or mouth and make you sick.
- A pregnant woman with chickenpox can pass it on to her baby before birth, and mothers with chickenpox can also give it to their newborn babies after birth.
- A person who has not had chickenpox or the varicella vaccine can get the chickenpox virus from touching fluid from the shingles blisters. People with shingles can pass the chickenpox virus to other persons for up to seven days after blisters appear.

People with chickenpox can spread the virus to others from up to five days before the rash appears and until five days after the rash appears. They are most contagious from the day before and for the first few days after the rash appears.

To help reduce the spread of chickenpox, children with the illness should be kept away from daycare or school until five days after the rash first appears. It usually takes two to three weeks from the time there is contact with the virus until a person gets sick. If your child is exposed to chickenpox, watch for signs of the illness for the next two to three weeks.

## **Can chickenpox lead to more serious illness?**

Sometimes chickenpox can cause more serious complications or illness. These include:

- A bacterial infection of the skin can occur after scratching the chickenpox rash. The infection can sometimes become severe, even causing death.
- Babies who get chickenpox from their mothers before birth may be born with birth defects.
- Young children with chickenpox may get pneumonia (infection of the lungs), or have problems with other organs inside the body, such as the brain.

- Pregnant women, newborn infants, people 13 years and older, and people who have weakened immune systems are more likely to have a severe case of chickenpox and suffer more complications.

### **Can chickenpox be prevented?**

The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine can prevent chickenpox. The Yukon Department of Health and Social Services provides the chickenpox vaccine free of charge to anyone who has not had chickenpox or the vaccine before. For more information contact your local health centre.

If you have been exposed to the chickenpox virus, your care will depend on your age, personal health circumstances, and severity of the illness. Most healthy children will only need to stay at home and rest. Teens who get chickenpox may have more severe symptoms than children, and are at slightly higher risk for complications or problems than younger children. Still, most only need to stay at home and rest to get better.

Pregnant women, newborn babies, adults with no history of having had chickenpox and people with certain immune system problems are at increased risk for complications or problems from chickenpox. These people should see a doctor **immediately** if they get the disease, or have been near someone who has the illness. Prevention methods must be started as soon as possible to reduce the illness, and the risk for complications.

Prevention methods may include an antiviral medication such as Acyclovir, an injection of Varicella Zoster Immune Globulin (VZIG) or the varicella vaccine. The VZIG shot may prevent chickenpox, if given within 96 hours after being near a person who has chickenpox. VZIG is available for certain people at higher risk of complications, such as pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems and some newborn infants. Acyclovir or other antiviral medications may be prescribed for other groups of people that are at high risk of complications of the illness. In addition to pregnant women, newborn babies, adults and people with certain immune system problems, Acyclovir may be used for people over 13 years of age, children over one year of age with chronic skin or lung disorders, and children on chronic aspirin treatment.

This medication must be prescribed by a doctor and given within the first 24 hours after the rash starts. Acyclovir is not recommended for healthy children who get chickenpox.

Healthy people who have not been vaccinated and have not had chickenpox, but get exposed to the chickenpox virus can lessen the severity of the illness by getting vaccinated within the first 3 to 5 days after their first exposure.

### **Home treatment for chickenpox**

For most people, chickenpox is a mild disease. If you have chickenpox, you should rest but do not need to stay in bed. The most helpful things to do are those that make you or your child feel more comfortable. These include:

- Drink lots of liquids like water, juice and soup, especially if there is a fever. If your baby is breastfeeding, feed your baby more often.
- Use acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) to bring down a fever. *Do not give any medicine that contains acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) to a child or teenager.* A child or teenager may get a serious liver disease called Reye's syndrome if they take medicines with acetylsalicylic acid.
- Keep fingernails short and clean, and cover hands at night with socks to prevent scratching.
- Keep the skin cool to relieve itching. Dress lightly and avoid hot baths and showers. Ask your pharmacist or community health nurse about lotions that can help take away the itching.

- Prevent the spread of infection by using a household cleaner to wash any articles that are soiled with fluid from chickenpox blisters, and by separating the person who is sick from other family members who have not had chickenpox.

### **What are shingles?**

The same virus that causes chickenpox causes shingles. The virus goes into a resting or inactive state in some nerve cells in your body. Years later the virus may become active again causing shingles. Only people who have already had chickenpox can get shingles.

Early symptoms of shingles include headache, sensitivity to light, and flu-like symptoms without a fever. You may then feel itching, tingling, or extreme pain in the area where a rash will develop several days later. The rash commonly occurs on the back or neck. The rash progresses into clusters of blisters, called "shingles", which then fill with pus and eventually crust over. It takes two to four weeks for the blisters to heal, although some scars may remain. A person with shingles who feels well does not need to stay away from work or other activities, *as long as the rash can be completely covered.*

### **Contact Information**

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

***Adapted from BC HealthFiles***