



# Fact Sheet: Chickenpox

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*

## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Once a person has had chickenpox, they usually will not get it again. However, the virus remains dormant in a person's body and may reactivate years later as herpes zoster (shingles).

## Who gets chickenpox?

Chickenpox is most common in young children and adolescents, but can occur at any age. It is possible for a person to get a milder form of chickenpox, even if they have received the vaccine.

## What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Itchy raised rash, fluid-filled blisters surrounded by a red area appearing on the face, upper body, arms, and legs

## How does chickenpox spread?

- Direct person to person contact
- Droplets from the nose, throat, and mouth through sneezing and coughing from an infected person
- Touching the blisters, rash, or items freshly soiled by discharges from an infected person

Chickenpox is contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash begins. An exposed person may develop the illness within 10 to 21 days and will remain

contagious until all the lesions have dried, crusted over or formed scabs, which usually occurs within 5 to 7 days.

## How is chickenpox treated?

Most cases of chickenpox resolve on their own without specific treatment.

- Mild cases require only rest and plenty of fluids
- Calamine lotion and oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching
- Itching may be decreased by taking an antihistamine such as oral Benadryl
- Tylenol or Motrin can be used to reduce fever and relieve minor aches and pains. Children and teens should not take aspirin
- Keep fingernails trimmed short and clean to reduce the chance of getting an infection from scratching the blisters

Antiviral medications are recommended for people with chickenpox who are more likely to develop serious disease. In these cases, a healthcare provider should be contacted for treatment recommendations:

- Newborns and people over 12 years of age
- People with chronic skin or lung disease
- People receiving steroid therapy
- Pregnant women
- People with immune deficiencies such as cancer or HIV/AIDS

### **How can chickenpox be prevented?**

- People infected with the disease should remain home to avoid exposing others
- A vaccine to protect people against chickenpox is recommended for persons 12 months and older
- Pregnant women should not get the vaccine since it contains a live virus. Wait until after giving birth to receive the vaccine
- Persons who have previously had chickenpox, do not need to be vaccinated
- Use a tissue and/or the inside of the arm to catch sneezes and coughs. Discard used tissues into a trash can

### **Do children need to stay home from school?**

Yes. A child with chickenpox should be kept home from daycare or school for at least six days after the rash first appeared or until the blisters have crusted over.