

Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a virus infection that causes a blistering and very itchy skin rash. Complications involving other parts of the body, although rare, can develop and can be serious. Chickenpox is usually a childhood illness, but it can occur in adults. A vaccine is available to prevent chickenpox.

Cause

Chickenpox is caused by a herpes virus called *varicella zoster*.

It is spread by droplets breathed out into the air (e.g., coughing or sneezing) or by the fluid of chickenpox (and shingles) blisters and it is very contagious.

Signs and symptoms

- Begin between 10 and 21 days after the person is infected.
- Chickenpox may start with a headache, runny nose, mild fever, cough and general unwell feeling 1–2 days before the rash appears.
- The chickenpox rash appears as small, red spots that quickly become very itchy blisters. The blisters usually last



3 to 4 days then dry out to form crusts (scabs).

- The rash usually starts on the face, back and chest then spreads. New spots can continue to appear for up to five days.
- The number of blisters can vary from a few on the trunk, to covering the whole body. They can occur anywhere, including the scalp, eyelids, mouth, throat, anus and vagina.

- The various stages of spots, blistering and crusts may be present on different parts of the body as the rash progresses.
- Blisters can become infected by bacteria and can leave scars.
- Complications include pneumonia, brain infection, skin infection and a bleeding tendency. Chickenpox in the first or second trimester of pregnancy may damage the foetus. Chickenpox late in pregnancy may cause severe illness in the newborn child.

Symptoms are usually more severe for adults and people with a weakened immune system.

How contagious is chickenpox?

- A person with chickenpox is contagious from 2 days before the rash appears until all the blisters have dried.
- People with chickenpox should not go to child care, school or work until all the blisters have dried – usually at least 5 days after the rash first appears.
- Someone who has had chickenpox has usually developed immunity to it and so will not catch it again.
- After chickenpox, some of the virus lies inactive in nerve cells in the body. This virus can reactivate later to cause shingles (also known as herpes zoster).
- A person who has not had chickenpox, and has not been immunised against it, can catch chickenpox from a person with shingles.

Preventing chickenpox

Chickenpox vaccine (an injection) can protect against both chickenpox and shingles.

Children

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends at least one dose of chickenpox vaccine (also known as varicella vaccine or VZV) be given to non-immune children aged 12 months to 13 years.

- The Australian National Immunisation Program (NIP) provides one dose of chickenpox vaccine free of charge to all children at 12–18 months of age.
- The National Immunisation Program provides a free ‘catch-up’ vaccination for children at an age between 10 and 13 years who have not been vaccinated and who have not had chickenpox.
- The NIP free vaccine is available from local doctors and immunisation clinics.
- Children aged between 18 months and 10 years are not eligible for free vaccine, but can arrange vaccination with their doctor.

A second dose of vaccine can give increased protection, but is not provided free of charge by the National Immunisation Program. It can be arranged privately with a doctor.

People over 14 years of age

The NHMRC recommends two doses of chickenpox vaccine be given to non-immune people over 14 years of age, especially child care workers, teachers, health care workers, parents of young children, household contacts of persons with a weakened immune system and women prior to pregnancy. Ask a doctor.

Treatment

Treatment for chickenpox aims to relieve itching, fever and discomfort and includes:

- Cool, wet compresses applied to the blisters
- Cool baths with a soothing oil, sodium bicarbonate or oatmeal added to the water
- Hydrogel wound dressings to soothe lesions and reduce formation of scabs and scars
- Creams and lotions to relieve itch
- Antihistamine tablets and syrups to reduce itch
- Soothing mouthwashes for blisters in mouth and throat
- Paracetamol to reduce pain and fever (a person with chickenpox should not take aspirin).

Ask a pharmacist for advice.

A doctor may prescribe antiviral medicines for a person with complications or a weakened immune system.

Important

Most people recover from chickenpox without any problems. However, consult a doctor if:

- Blisters get red and sore with pus
- High fever, severe headaches or vomiting develop
- Joint pain develops
- You also have a condition or are taking medicine that weakens your immune system (e.g., chemotherapy, radiotherapy, HIV).

A person with chickenpox should avoid contact with:

- Anyone who has never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine
- Anyone who has a weak immune system
- Babies under 12 months
- Pregnant women.

Self care

- Rest as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of fluid, even if blisters in the mouth and throat make swallowing difficult.
- Resist scratching blisters, to reduce the chances of bacterial infection and scarring. Keep nails clean and short, to help avoid scratching. The itch may be relieved by gently patting the lesions.
- Use good personal hygiene (e.g., cover mouth if coughing or sneezing, wash hands often, bathe regularly, do not share food or eating utensils).

For more information

Immunise Australia Program

Phone: 1800 671 811

Website: www.immunise.health.gov.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

*Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: