

FACT SHEET: CHICKENPOX (Varicella)

May 2025

WHAT IS CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA)?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a highly contagious viral disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). It causes a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness, and fever. Chickenpox occurs most frequently in the winter and early spring.

WHO CAN GET CHICKENPOX?

Anyone can get chickenpox. With most people having had chickenpox by young adulthood, it can occur in anyone who has not been previously vaccinated or had the disease. Chickenpox is usually more severe or life-threatening in infants, adolescents, adults, pregnant women, and people who are immunosuppressed.

HOW IS CHICKENPOX SPREAD?

Chickenpox is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact with fluid from blisters, secretions from the respiratory tract or by handling an infected person's clothing or bedding. Airborne transmission occurs mainly through respiratory droplets that contain the virus, making the disease highly contagious even before the rash appears. A pregnant woman with chickenpox can spread it to her unborn baby before birth. Mothers with chickenpox can also give it to their newborn babies.

HOW SOON AFTER EXPOSURE DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

It takes from 10-21 days after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CHICKENPOX?

The first symptoms of chickenpox include a sudden onset of a slight fever and feeling tired and weak. Upper respiratory symptoms, such as a runny nose, may be present. These symptoms are followed by the appearance of an itchy blister-like rash, usually on the trunk of the body. The blister-like rash appears in "crops" and there can be several stages of the rash

present at the same time. A blister-like rash occurs more frequently on areas of the body that are usually covered with clothing. However, they can appear on the scalp, in the mouth and throat, and on the area around the eye. Over time, the blisters become dry and a scab is formed.

IS A PERSON WITH CHICKENPOX CONTAGIOUS?

A person with chickenpox is contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash develops until all blisters have formed scabs. If you visit a physician's office or a hospital emergency room, notify them immediately upon your arrival that you believe you have chickenpox. They will move you to an area that will not put others at risk of developing the disease.

HOW IS CHICKENPOX TREATED?

It is recommended parents/guardians call their healthcare provider. Non-aspirin medications (e.g., acetaminophen) can be given to relieve fever. Do not use aspirin or salicylate-containing products as it may cause Reye's syndrome, a potentially serious complication related to chickenpox.

HOW CAN CHICKENPOX BE PREVENTED?

Chickenpox can now be prevented by a safe and effective vaccine. All children between the ages of 12-15 months should receive their first dose. The second dose is recommended when children are 4-6 years of age. For children ages 7 and older who haven't been vaccinated against chickenpox, a catch-up schedule involves two doses of the varicella vaccine, with the second dose given at least 3 months after the first dose. For those 13 years and older, the recommended interval is 4-8 weeks between the two doses. If your child is not vaccinated and is exposed to chickenpox, contact your healthcare provider. Your child may still be protected or the severity of their symptoms can be reduced if they are vaccinated immediately. Chickenpox vaccination is not recommended during pregnancy.

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SHOULD A PERSON WITH CHICKENPOX BE EXCLUDED FROM WORK OR SCHOOL?

A person with chickenpox should remain at home until all blisters are dried and scabbed over.

CAN YOU GET CHICKENPOX MORE THAN ONCE?

It is uncommon to have chickenpox more than once. For most people, one infection confers life-long immunity. However, a second infection is more common among those with a weakened immune system. Older adults are at an increased risk of infection, as the immune system weakens with age. The varicella-zoster virus (VZV) can also reactivate later in life. This causes a related condition called shingles. Shingles also causes a rash and other symptoms.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about chickenpox and other related health topics can be found [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.