

Chicken pox (varicella)

What is chicken pox?

Chicken pox is a highly contagious disease caused by the varicella virus, a type of herpes virus.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms include a sudden onset of a mild fever and feeling tired and weak. An itchy, blistering rash then appears, usually starting on the chest, back or abdomen and spreading to the face, arms and legs. In severe cases, the blisters appear on all parts of the body, including the scalp and lining of the mouth, throat and eyelids. The blisters do not appear at the same time and tend to develop in "crops" that take from one to four days to form, break, and crust over. Mild or inapparent infections occasionally occur in children. The disease is usually more serious in adults than in children.

How is chicken pox spread?

Chicken pox spreads by direct contact with infected people, contact with objects freshly soiled by the fluid from chicken pox blisters or airborne droplets from coughs and sneezes of infected people. A person with chicken pox is contagious one to two days before the rash appears and until all the blisters have formed scabs (usually about five days). Contagiousness may be prolonged in people with impaired immunity.

Who gets chicken pox?

Anyone who has never had chicken pox and has never been vaccinated can get chicken pox. Occasionally, people that have been vaccinated may still get chicken pox if exposed, but the disease is usually much milder and goes away sooner. Babies younger than 12 months old, because they are too young to be vaccinated may also get chicken pox.

How is chicken pox treated?

Consult with a doctor early if you suspect you or a household member has chicken pox. The disease is usually mild in children but sometimes complications can occur, including: bacterial infections of the skin and soft tissues in children and pneumonia in adults. Chicken pox may be particularly severe in newborns, pregnant women and can be fatal for those with weakened immune systems. Acyclovir, an anti-viral medication, may be used as a treatment for chicken pox. However, because chicken pox tends to be mild in healthy children, most physicians do not believe that it is necessary to prescribe this medication.

How can you prevent chicken pox?

Chicken pox vaccine is recommended at 12-18 months of age and is required for kindergarten school entry. It is recommended that children younger than 13 years of age, without a history of chicken pox, receive a single dose of vaccine. Adolescents and adults without disease history should receive two doses of vaccine 4-6 weeks apart.