

FACTSHEET

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Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a viral illness. The chickenpox virus is also called varicella virus or varicella zoster virus. It is the same virus that can cause shingles.

Children with chickenpox often have a fever, headache, runny nose, a cough and feel very tired. The rash starts after 1-2 days on the chest and back, and spreads to the face, scalp, arms and legs. The rash can develop all over the body, inside the ears, on the eyelids, inside the nose and even within the vagina. The rash continues to spread for three or four days. It is usually very itchy.

Within a few hours after each spot appears, a blister forms. It may appear full of yellow fluid. After a day or so, the fluid turns cloudy. These spots are easily broken and form a scab. The spots heal at different stages, some faster than others, so your child may have the rash in several different stages at once.

Some children breeze through chickenpox with just a few spots. Others have a terrible time with hundreds of itchy spots. In families with several children, the illness can last for several weeks within the family if other family members become infected.

Incubation period

A child is susceptible to chickenpox if they have never been immunised against it, or have never had chickenpox.

A parent often doesn't know their child has been exposed to chickenpox. Some susceptible children (children who have not been immunised or who have not had chickenpox in the past) can come into contact with chickenpox and yet show no signs of having caught it. But the general

rule is that chickenpox will show up about 10 to 21 days after your child has contact with an infectious person if he or she is susceptible to infection.

Infectious period

Chickenpox is a highly contagious, common childhood disease. A susceptible child can catch chickenpox if they have been in the same room for a period of time with a person with chickenpox or playing with another child with chickenpox. They can also catch it if they have been in contact with some item that has live chickenpox virus still on it e.g. the inside surface of clothing worn by someone who has chickenpox. A child is infectious from two days before the rash appears and stays infectious until all the blisters form scabs and are dry. Generally, this takes 5 - 7 days. Children must stay away from day-care or school while they are infectious. Once all the spots have formed scabs, the person is no longer infectious. Your child may go back to school as long as the spots are all scabbed over and dry.

Chickenpox is most common in children between the ages of 2 years and 10 years. If one child in your household gets it, it is almost certain that any others who have never had chickenpox or been immunised will get it next. Some children catch chickenpox but do not develop a rash.

Treatment

- Most children do not need any treatment for chickenpox

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- For fever or pain, give your child Paracetamol. **Never give your child aspirin, which can be dangerous for children with chickenpox.**
 - Chickenpox can be prevented by immunisation.
 - Do not use Calamine lotion as it dries the skin. This makes the spots more itchy, and your child will want to scratch them even more.

Preventing scarring

Secondary bacterial infection of the spots can be caused by your child scratching, which can lead to scars.

To help prevent scarring from the spots:

- Dress your child in lightweight pyjamas or clothing.
- Clip your child's fingernails as closely as you can.
- Try putting mittens on the hands of very young children.
- Change your child's clothes and bed sheets daily.
- Apply a soothing lotion such as Sorbolene lotion.
- If your child is fidgety and wants to scratch the spots, your doctor may suggest an anti-itch medicine.

Remember:

- Most cases of chickenpox are mild and children get better completely.
- Scarring can happen if your child scratches the spots and they get infected.
- For fever or pain, give your child paracetamol, not aspirin (make sure the dose of medication is recommended the packaging, by your child's doctor or pharmacist).
- Your child needs to see a doctor if they have a very high fever or are very ill, particularly if they become very drowsy, or are breathing fast or vomiting a lot.