



Frequently asked questions about Chickenpox

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

What causes chickenpox and how is it spread? Chickenpox is an infectious disease. Chickenpox is very contagious and spreads from person to person by direct contact or through the air from an infected person's coughing or sneezing.

How long does it take to show signs of chickenpox after being exposed? A person with chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes from 10-21 days after contact with an infectious person for someone to develop chickenpox.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox? For people who have not been vaccinated, their first indication of chickenpox may be fever and/or headache, followed by the appearance of a rash on the trunk and face. The rash goes through the following phases as it spreads:

- Raised pink or red bumps called papules break out on the face, trunk and then arms and legs.
- The bumps become blister-like (called vesicles) and begin to itch. This happens over the course of the day.
- The vesicles crust over and form scabs and may take several days before healing. A person may have different phases of the rash going on simultaneously all over the body.

Is there a treatment for chickenpox? There is no "cure" for chickenpox, only supportive treatment (bed rest, fluids, and fever reduction). In some cases, a physician may prescribe an antiviral drug to lessen the severity.

The person with chickenpox may try the following home remedies to relieve the itching:

- Soaking in a cool bath that has either baking soda or uncooked oatmeal added.
- Applying calamine lotion to the rash area
- Eating a soft, bland diet if sores appear in the mouth.

- Using over the counter antihistamines to control the itching. Please consult with your physician first if the infected person is a child.
- Calamine lotion dabbed on the blisters.
- Taking fever reduction medications. **Please note: if the infected person is a child, do not give aspirin products.**

How long does it take to recover from chickenpox? Chickenpox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5-10 days.

How long is a person with chickenpox contagious? A person infected with the virus is contagious 1 to 2 days prior to exhibiting symptoms and remains contagious until all blisters have scabbed over.

What is my best protection so I don't get the chickenpox? Chickenpox vaccine is the best way to prevent chickenpox. Vaccination not only protects vaccinated persons, it also reduces the risk for exposure in the community for persons unable to be vaccinated because of illness or other conditions, including those who may be at greater risk for severe disease. While no vaccine is 100% effective in preventing disease, the chickenpox vaccine is very effective: about 8 to 9 of every 10 people who are vaccinated are completely protected from chickenpox. In addition, the vaccine almost always prevents against severe disease. If a vaccinated person does get chickenpox, it is usually a very mild case lasting only a few days and involving fewer skin lesions (usually less than 50), mild or no fever, and few other symptoms.

- **Young children.** Two doses of varicella vaccine are required as part of the routine child immunization schedule:
 - First dose – Between ages 12 and 15 months
 - Second dose - Between ages 4 and 6 years
- **Unvaccinated older children.** Beginning January 1, 2010, Michigan requires all 6th graders and children changing school districts to have either 2 doses of varicella or a history of having had the disease.
 - Children 12 months to 12 years who have not been vaccinated should receive their first dose of varicella vaccine, with a second dose to be given three months later.
 - Children age 13 or older should receive their first dose of varicella vaccine with a second dose to be given 28 days later.

- **Unvaccinated adults who've never had chickenpox but are at high risk of exposure.** Adults who've never had chickenpox or have not been vaccinated should receive two doses of the vaccine. However, women who are pregnant should not get the chickenpox vaccine.

When in doubt call your healthcare provider or call the Health Department at the contact numbers on the back of this sheet.

What should I do if I think I have the chickenpox? Contact your healthcare provider a walk-in clinic and explain that you have been exposed and describe your symptoms. **The Health Department does not offer this service.** If at all possible, do not go to school or work or other public settings where you may expose others to the disease.

How serious is chickenpox? In most children, chickenpox is usually a mild disease. Adults may develop a more serious disease called shingles with more complications. People with compromised immunity, pregnant women and infants born to mothers who have never had chickenpox may also be at risk for more serious complications.

What are possible complications from chickenpox?

- Bacterial infection of the skin, swelling of the brain, and pneumonia. Adolescents and adults are more at risk for severe disease.
- Adults and those with a weakened immunity may develop shingles – a painful outbreak of blisters that appear along nerve endings.
- **Newborns of women exposed to chickenpox during her pregnancy may suffer from low birth weight, birth defects and life-threatening infections.**

Can you get chickenpox more than once? Yes.

For more information about chickenpox and other important health information, visit us on the web:

www.bhsj.org

Or call your local Health Department office at:

Coldwater
279-9561 x 141

Hillsdale
437-7395 x 110

Three Rivers
273-2161 x 241