

Chickenpox

Introduction

Chickenpox is a mild and common childhood illness that most children catch at some point.

It causes a rash of red, itchy spots that turn into fluid-filled blisters. They then crust over to form scabs, which eventually drop off.

Some children have only a few spots, but in others they can cover the entire body. The spots are most likely to appear on the face, ears and scalp, under the arms, on the chest and belly and on the arms and legs.

Chickenpox (medically known as varicella) is caused by a virus called the varicella-zoster virus. It's spread quickly and easily through the coughs and sneezes of someone who is infected.

Chickenpox is most common in children under 10. In fact, chickenpox is so common in childhood that 90% of adults are immune to the condition because they've had it before.

Children usually catch chickenpox in winter and spring, particularly between March and May.

What to do

To prevent spreading the infection, keep children off nursery or school until all the spots have crusted over.

Chickenpox is most infectious from one to two days before the rash starts, until all the blisters have crusted over (usually five to six days after the start of the rash).

If your child has chickenpox, try to keep them away from public areas to avoid contact with people who have not had it, especially people who are at risk of serious problems, such as newborn babies, pregnant women and anyone with a weakened immune system (for example, people having cancer treatment or taking steroid tablets).

Chickenpox treatment

Chickenpox in children is considered a mild illness, but expect your child to feel pretty miserable and irritable while they have it.

Your child is likely to have a fever at least for the first few days of the illness. The spots can be incredibly itchy.

There is no specific treatment for chickenpox, but there are pharmacy remedies which can alleviate symptoms, such as paracetamol to relieve fever and calamine lotion and cooling gels to ease itching.

In most children, the blisters crust up and fall off naturally within one to two weeks.

When to see a doctor

For most children, chickenpox is a mild illness that gets better on its own.

But some children can become more seriously ill with chickenpox. They need to see a doctor.

Contact your DOCTOR straight away if your child develops any abnormal symptoms, for example:

if the blisters on their skin become infected

if your child has a pain in their chest or has difficulty breathing

Chickenpox in adults

Chickenpox may be a childhood illness, but adults can get it too. Chickenpox tends to be more severe in adults than children, and adults have a higher risk of developing complications.

As with children, adults with chickenpox should stay off work until all the spots have crusted over. They should seek medical advice if they develop any abnormal symptoms, such as infected blisters.

Adults with chickenpox may benefit from taking antiviral medicine if treatment is started early in the course of the illness. Read more about antivirals in the treatment of chickenpox.

Who's at special risk?

Some children and adults are at special risk of serious problems if they catch chickenpox. They include:

pregnant women

newborn babies

people with a weakened immune system

These people should seek medical advice as soon as they are exposed to the chickenpox virus or they develop chickenpox symptoms.

They may need a blood test to check if they are immune (protected from) chickenpox.

Chickenpox in pregnancy

Chickenpox occurs in approximately three in every 1,000 pregnancies. It can cause serious complications for both the pregnant woman and her baby. See [Chickenpox - complications](#) for further information on what to do if you are exposed to chickenpox during pregnancy.

Chickenpox and shingles

Once you have had chickenpox, you usually develop antibodies to the infection and become immune to catching it again. However, the virus that causes chickenpox, the varicella virus, remains dormant (inactive) in your body's nerve tissues and can return later in life as an illness called shingles.

It is possible to catch chickenpox from someone with shingles, but not the other way around.

Is there a vaccine against chickenpox?

There is a chickenpox vaccine but it is not part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule. The vaccine is only offered to children and adults who are particularly vulnerable to chickenpox complications.

Symptoms of chickenpox

The most commonly recognised chickenpox symptom is a red rash that can cover the entire body.

However, even before the rash appears, you or your child may have some mild flu-like symptoms including:

feeling sick

a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over

aching, painful muscles

headache

generally feeling unwell

loss of appetite

These flu-like symptoms, especially the fever, tend to be worse in adults than in children.

Chickenpox spots

Soon after the flu-like symptoms, an itchy rash appears. Some children and adults may only have a few spots, but others are covered from head to toe.

The spots normally appear in clusters and tend to be:

behind the ears

on the face

over the scalp

under the arms

on the chest and belly

on the arms and legs

But the spots can be anywhere on the body, even inside the ears and mouth, on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet and inside the nappy area.

Although the rash starts as small, itchy red spots, after about 12-14 hours the spots develop a blister on top and become intensely itchy.

After a day or two, the fluid in the blisters gets cloudy and they begin to dry out and crust over.

After one to two weeks, the crusting skin will fall off naturally.

New spots can keep appearing in waves for three to five days after the rash begins. Therefore different clusters of spots may be at different stages of blistering or drying out.

Unusual symptoms

Most healthy children (and adults) recover from chickenpox with no lasting ill-effects simply by resting, just as with a cold or flu.

But some children and adults are unlucky and have a more severe bout than usual.

Contact your DOCTOR straight away if you or your child develop any abnormal symptoms, for example:

if the skin surrounding the blisters becomes red and painful

if you or your child start to get pain in the chest or have difficulty breathing

In these cases, prescription medicine, and possibly hospital treatment, may be needed.

Causes of chickenpox

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. You catch it by coming into contact with someone who is infected with the virus.

It's a very contagious infection. About 90% of people who have not previously had chickenpox will become infected when they come into contact with the virus.

How you catch the virus

The chickenpox virus is spread in the same ways as colds and flu. It's contained in the millions of tiny droplets that come out of the nose and mouth when an infected person sneezes or coughs. You can then become infected with the virus by breathing in these droplets from the air.

You can also become infected by handling a surface or object that these droplets have landed on, then transferring the virus to yourself by touching your face.

It takes seven to 21 days for the symptoms of chickenpox to show after you have come into contact with the virus. This is called the 'incubation period'.

Someone with chickenpox is most infectious from one to two days before the rash appears until all the blisters have crusted over. This usually takes five to six days from the start of the rash.

Shingles

If you have not had chickenpox before, you can also catch chickenpox from someone with shingles (an infection caused by the same virus). However, it's not possible to catch shingles from someone who has chickenpox.

Diagnosing chickenpox

Tips for parents

See the pregnancy and baby guide for practical advice about all aspects of parenting, plus videos and interactive tools to help you and your child stay healthy.

You or your child should not usually need any medical tests to diagnose chickenpox. You can be pretty sure that it is chickenpox if there are the key symptoms of a mild fever followed by an itchy rash, blisters and scabs.

Chickenpox spots are usually distinctive enough to distinguish from other rashes, although occasionally they can be easily confused with other conditions that affect the skin, such as insect bites or scabies (a contagious skin condition that causes intense itching).

Watch this slideshow of common skin conditions to see what scabies, insect bites and other common skin rashes look like, so that you don't confuse them with chickenpox.

If you're still uncertain about what is causing the symptoms, your DOCTOR can carry out a simple blood test to identify the virus.

Find phone numbers for your local DOCTORS.

When to contact your DOCTOR

1. See your DOCTOR if you're not sure whether you or your child have chickenpox.

2. Contact your DOCTOR urgently if you have been in contact with someone who has chickenpox or you have chickenpox symptoms and:

you are pregnant

you have a weakened immune system (the body's defence system)

your baby is less than four weeks old

Chickenpox in these instances can cause serious complications if left untreated. It is essential to seek medical advice so that you can receive any necessary treatment.

3. Contact your DOCTOR if you have chickenpox and are breastfeeding. They can advise about whether you should continue breastfeeding your baby.

Having a blood test

Once you have contacted your DOCTOR, you may need a test to see if you're already immune from chickenpox.

If you have had chickenpox in the past, then it is extremely unlikely that you will develop chickenpox for a second time. If you've never had chickenpox, or you're unsure whether you've had it, then you may need an immunity test.

This is a blood test that checks whether you are producing the antibodies to the chickenpox virus.

If your blood test result shows that you have the antibodies, you'll be naturally protected from the virus. If you don't have the antibodies, then you'll need to be monitored closely to see if you develop chickenpox symptoms. If you do, you may require further treatment.

Treating chickenpox

There is no cure for chickenpox, and the virus usually clears up by itself without any treatment.

However, there are ways of easing the itch and discomfort, and there are important steps you can take to stop chickenpox spreading.

Painkillers

If your child is in pain or has a high temperature (fever), you can give them a mild painkiller, such as paracetamol (available over-the-counter in pharmacies). Always read the manufacturer's dosage instructions.

Paracetamol is the preferred painkiller for treating the associated symptoms of chickenpox. This is due to a very small risk of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, causing adverse skin reactions during chickenpox.

Avoid giving your child ibuprofen if they have asthma or a history of stomach problems. If you're not sure whether ibuprofen is suitable, check with your DOCTOR or pharmacist. If your child is younger than three months old, you should always speak to your DOCTOR before giving your child any kind of pain relief.

If you're pregnant and need to take painkillers, then paracetamol is the first choice. You can use it at any stage of pregnancy. Only take ibuprofen during the second trimester (weeks 14-27 of the pregnancy).

If you're pregnant and you have chickenpox, you should visit your DOCTOR as soon as possible. You may need to have antiviral medicine or immunoglobulin treatment to prevent your symptoms from getting worse (see below).

Keeping hydrated

It is important for children (and adults) with chickenpox to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration. Sugar-free ice-lollies are a good way of getting fluids into children. They also help to soothe a sore mouth that has chickenpox spots in it.

Avoid any food that may make the mouth sore, such as salty foods. Soup is easy to swallow as long as it is not too hot.

Stop the scratching

Chickenpox can be incredibly itchy, but it's important for children (and adults) to not scratch the spots so as to avoid future scarring.

One way of stopping scratching is to keep fingernails clean and short. You can also put socks over your child's hands at night to stop them scratching the rash as they sleep.

If your child's skin is very itchy or sore, try using calamine lotion or cooling gels. These are available in pharmacies and are very safe to use. They have a soothing, cooling effect.

A stronger medicine called chlorphenamine can also help to relieve the itching. It's available from your pharmacist over the counter or it can be prescribed by your DOCTOR. Chlorphenamine is taken by mouth and is suitable for children over one year old.

Cool clothing

If your child has a fever, or if their skin is sore and aggravated, dress them appropriately so that they don't get too hot or too cold. Loose-fitting, smooth, cotton fabrics are best and will help stop the skin from becoming sore and irritated.

If your child has chickenpox, avoid sponging them down with cool water. This can make your child too cold, and it may make them shiver.

Stronger treatments

Antiviral medicine

Aciclovir is an antiviral medicine that is sometimes given to people with chickenpox.

Aciclovir may be prescribed to:

pregnant women

adults, if they visit their DOCTOR within 24 hours of the rash appearing

newborn babies

people with a weakened immune system (the body's defence system)

Ideally, aciclovir needs to be started within 24 hours of the rash appearing. It does not cure chickenpox, but it makes the symptoms less severe. You normally need to take the medicine as tablets five times a day for seven days.

If you are taking aciclovir, make sure you drink plenty of fluids. Side effects are rare but can include nausea and diarrhoea.

Read more about antiviral treatment for chickenpox.

Immunoglobulin treatment

Immunoglobulin is a solution of antibodies that is taken from healthy donors. Varicella-zoster immunoglobulin (VZIG) contains antibodies to the chickenpox virus.

Immunoglobulin treatment is given by drip. It is not used to treat chickenpox but to protect people who are at high risk of developing a severe chickenpox infection. This includes:

pregnant women

newborn babies

people with weakened immune systems

In the case of pregnant women, immunoglobulin treatment also reduces the risk of the unborn baby becoming infected.

As the supply of VZIG is limited, it will only be considered if a high-risk person has:

been significantly exposed to the virus – significant exposure could be face-to-face contact with someone who has chickenpox

been in the same room for 15 minutes with someone who has chickenpox

had a blood test to confirm that they've not had chickenpox before

In some cases, newborn babies may be given immunoglobulin treatment without having a blood test first.

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Preventing the spread of chickenpox

Tips for parents

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If your child has chickenpox, the Health Protection Agency recommends you inform their school or nursery and keep them at home for five days.

If you have chickenpox, stay off work and at home until you're no longer infectious, which is until the last blister has burst and crusted over. This usually takes five or six days after the rash begins.

If either you or your child has chickenpox, it is also a good idea for you, or them, to avoid contact with:

pregnant women

newborn babies

anyone who has a weak immune system, such as people who are having chemotherapy (a treatment for cancer) or taking steroid tablets

If you or your child have recently been exposed to the chickenpox virus, you may not be able to visit friends or relatives in hospital. Telephone the ward to check first.

Travelling on a plane

If you or your child have chickenpox, you may not be allowed to fly until six days after the last spot has appeared.

You and your child should be safe to fly once you're past the infectious stage and all of the blisters have crusted over. But it's best to check the policy of your airline first. Inform the airline as soon as chickenpox is diagnosed.

It is also important to let your travel insurer know if you or your child have chickenpox. You need to make sure that you'll be covered if you have to delay or cancel your holiday, or if you need to extend your stay until your child is well enough to fly home.

Stop the virus spreading

Chickenpox can sometimes be spread through contact with objects that have been infected with the virus, such as children's toys, bedding or clothing.

If someone in your household has chickenpox, you can help stop the virus spreading by wiping any objects or surfaces with a sterilising solution and making sure that any infected clothing or bedding is washed regularly.

Vaccination

There is a chickenpox vaccine that is used to protect people who are most at risk of a serious chickenpox infection or of passing the infection on to someone who is at risk.

People who may be considered for chickenpox vaccination include:

healthcare workers who are not already immune – for example, a nurse who has never had chickenpox and who may pass it to someone they are treating if they become infected

people living with someone who has a weakened immune system – for example, the child of a parent receiving chemotherapy

The vaccine is not suitable for pregnant women. Avoid getting pregnant for three months after having the vaccine. The vaccine is also not suitable for people with weakened immune systems.