

Chickenpox

What is it?

- Chickenpox is a common illness caused by a virus called varicella-zoster.
- Most people only get chickenpox one time. If you have already had chickenpox you have a low risk of getting it again.
- Once you have been exposed to the virus it stays in your body without causing the illness. This is called the incubation period.
- The incubation period is 10 to 21 days (average of 14 to 16 days). This period may be longer if you have a weak immune system. After the incubation period, symptoms of chicken pox appear.
- Symptoms of chickenpox include:
 - itchy rash over the body (common areas are the face, hands, neck, arms and legs)
 - rash starts out as small red spots then changes to clear water blisters
 - fever
 - headache
 - tiredness
 - not hungry
- Blisters will burst, dry up, and scab over in 3 to 4 days.
- The rash can be present in different stages on the body. What this means is that there could be some blisters and some scabs at the same time.
- Chickenpox is contagious for 1 to 2 days before the rash begins and until all the sores are crusted over. People with a weak immune system might be contagious for a longer period of time.

Getting chickenpox may be very dangerous for some people with weak immune systems. People with cancer, premature babies and pregnant women who have not had chickenpox could be at risk.

How is it spread?

- Chickenpox is spread in 2 ways:
 - Airborne through droplets from the respiratory (breathing) tract of a person who has chickenpox.
 - Direct contact with the rash.

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Is there treatment for it?

- Chickenpox is usually not treated.
- Comfort measures may be given to relieve some of the symptoms until the illness goes away.
- An anti-viral medication may be given in certain circumstances.
- If you have a weak immune system and have been exposed to chickenpox, there is treatment to prevent you from getting infected. Your doctor will discuss any needed treatment with you.

What can be done to prevent the spread of it?

- Get the chickenpox vaccine.
- If you have never had chickenpox, try to stay away from anyone who is infected until all the blisters have dried and scabs have formed.
- If you are in the hospital during your illness or shortly before, you will need to go into Airborne Contact Precautions. Your healthcare provider will discuss this with you if needed.
- If you have a weak immune system and think that you may have been exposed to chickenpox, contact your healthcare provider to see if you need treatment.

Eventually, the chickenpox rash will go away and you will no longer have symptoms. The virus, however, continues to live in your nerve cells. It can come back as Shingles during times of emotional stress or when you have a weakened immune system.

A shingles vaccine is available. If you are over 50 years old, talk with your family doctor about getting the vaccine.

Exposure to a person with shingles may cause chickenpox in a person who has never had chickenpox.

For more information

Toronto Public Health

http://www.toronto.ca/health/chickenpox_factsheet.htm

**Stop the spread of germs and infection.
Clean your hands.**

