

## CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA)

Chickenpox (also known as varicella) is an acute viral illness. It is a common childhood infection that may be prevented by vaccination. It is highly contagious, but rarely serious for most children.

**CAUSE:** Varicella-zoster virus, a member of the herpesvirus family.

**SYMPTOMS:** Mild fever and generalized skin rash that begins on the chest, back, underarms, neck, and face. It starts out as red bumps. Within several hours, the bumps turn into small blisters, and then scabs after a few days. The sores commonly occur in batches with different stages (bumps, blisters, and sores) present at the same time.

Chickenpox can be severe in newborns and those with weakened immune systems. Most people have had chickenpox by the time they are adults. However, when it does occur in adults, it may be more severe.

**SPREAD:** From person to person by direct contact with (touching) the blister fluid or secretions from the nose or mouth of a person with chickenpox. Occasionally, when a person with chickenpox coughs or sneezes tiny droplets with chickenpox virus into the air and another person breathes them in (airborne spread).

**INCUBATION:** It takes from 10 to 21 days, usually 14 to 16 days, after being exposed until symptoms develop.

**CONTAGIOUS PERIOD:** From 1 to 2 days before the rash begins until blisters have become scabs (generally within 5 days after the appearance of the first blisters in an otherwise healthy child).

**EXCLUSION:** Until all the blisters have dried into scabs and no new blisters or sores have started within the last 24 hours; usually by day 6 after the rash began.

Chickenpox is still a common disease. It takes 10-14 days after receiving vaccine to develop immunity, vaccine failure occasionally occurs, and the incubation period is 10–21 days. Therefore, exclude children who:

- appear to have chickenpox regardless of whether or not they have received varicella vaccine, or
- develop blisters within 10–21 days after vaccination.

Exposed children without symptoms do not need to stay home unless chickenpox develops.

**DIAGNOSIS:** Based on typical symptoms and the characteristic rash.

**TREATMENT:** Call your healthcare provider.

**DO NOT GIVE ASPIRIN or OTHER SALICYLATE CONTAINING MEDICATIONS TO ANY CHILD OR ADOLESCENT UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE.** There is a risk of developing Reye syndrome (a serious condition which can cause death) when children or adolescents take aspirin for viral illnesses such as chickenpox or influenza.

**PREVENTION/CONTROL:**

1. All children should be routinely vaccinated at 12-18 months of age with one dose of varicella vaccine. Unvaccinated children 12 months-12 years of age, who do not have a reliable history of chickenpox, should receive one dose of

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### PREVENTION/CONTROL CONTINUED:

varicella vaccine. Susceptible persons 13 years of age and older should receive two doses of vaccine, at least 4 weeks apart.

2. If you think that your child has chickenpox, call your healthcare provider.  
**Please do not go to the healthcare provider's office without calling first. They will want to keep your child separate from others to prevent further spread.**
3. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after contact with secretions from the nose or mouth or blister fluid. **Thorough handwashing is the best way to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.**

### PREVENTIVE TREATMENT:

4. Susceptible persons (have not had chickenpox or varicella vaccine in the past) and who have been exposed to someone with chickenpox should call their healthcare provider immediately. Getting varicella vaccine within 3 days, and possibly up to 5 days, of exposure may prevent disease in these people.
5. When a pregnant woman or a person with a weakened immune system who has not had chickenpox or vaccine is exposed, they should contact a healthcare provider immediately for possible treatment. (See information on varicella-zoster and pregnancy on pages 21-22).

For more information, you or your healthcare provider may call Hennepin County Community Health Department at (952) 351-5230, or call your local health department.