

Chicken pox

Your questions answered

What is chicken pox?

A disease caused by infection with the varicella zoster virus, which causes fever and an itchy rash.

How is chicken pox transmitted?

Chicken pox, also called varicella, is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact or through the air from an infected person's coughing or sneezing or from aerosolization of virus from skin lesions. A person with chicken pox is contagious one to two days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes from 10 to 21 days after exposure for someone to develop chicken pox.

What are the symptoms?

In unvaccinated children, chicken pox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about five to 10 days. Children usually miss five or six days of school or child care due to the illness and have symptoms such as high fever, severe itching, an uncomfortable rash and dehydration or headache. In Kansas, children infected with chicken pox must be excluded from school until lesions have dried up and crusted over, which is usually five days following the onset of the rash.

What are the complications?

About one in 10 unvaccinated children who get the disease will have a complication from chicken pox serious enough to visit a health-care provider.

These complications include infected skin lesions, other infections, dehydration from vomiting or diarrhea or more serious complications such as pneumonia and encephalitis.

In vaccinated children, chicken pox illness is typically mild, producing no symptoms at all other than a few red bumps.

However, about 25 to 30 percent of vaccinated children who get the disease will develop illness as serious as unvaccinated children.

Certain groups of people are more likely to have more severe illness with serious complications. These include adults, infants, adolescents and people whose immune systems have been weakened because of illness or medications such as long-term use of steroids.

Chicken pox is usually not serious. Why not let kids get the disease?

It is not possible to predict who will have a mild case of chicken pox and who will have a serious or even deadly case of disease. Now that there is a safe and effective vaccine, it is not worth taking this chance.

What Can **YOU** Do?

How are patients with chicken pox treated?

Patients with chicken pox need to be kept comfortable. Over-the-counter fever reducers such as Tylenol can be used and calamine lotion can relieve itching.

It's important to keep patients from scratching to prevent infection and scarring. Some health care providers may prescribe antivirals if given within a week of exposure.

How can cases of chicken pox be prevented and controlled?

Vaccination is your best form of prevention. Currently, two doses of vaccine are recommended for children, adolescents and adults. All children and adults without evidence of immunity to varicella need the vaccine. Evidence of immunity includes any of the following:

- Documentation of two doses of varicella vaccine
- Blood tests that show you are immune to varicella or laboratory confirmation of prior disease
- Born in the United States before 1980, excluding health-care workers, pregnant women, and immunocompromised persons. These individuals need to meet one of the other criteria for evidence of immunity.
- Receipt from a health care provider of:
 - a. Diagnosis of chicken pox or
 - b. Verification of a history of chicken pox
- Receipt from a health care provider of:
 - a. Diagnosis of herpes zoster (shingles) or
 - b. Verification of a history of herpes zoster (shingles).

You do **NOT** need the chicken pox vaccine, if you meet any of the above criteria for evidence of immunity.

A person with chicken pox is contagious one to two days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes from 10 to 21 days after exposure for someone to develop chicken pox.

For more information on chicken pox, call the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department at (785) 843-0721 or visit us on the web at: www.ldchealth.org