

# Chickenpox

## *Information Sheet*

### What is it?

Chickenpox is a common childhood illness that is easily spread. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus. It affects mostly children under the age of 10 years and over 90% of the population have had chickenpox by the age of 15 years. One infection usually gives longlasting immunity. The virus however can remain in the body and be reactivated in later life to cause 'shingles'.

### How does a person become infected?

Infection is spread from person to person. Time between exposure and sickness is 10-21 days, usually 14-16 days. When a child catches the virus, it spreads rapidly throughout the body, affecting first the nose and throat and later the rest of the body. It is spread during the early illness by coughing but later spread can occur by direct contact with moist skin sores. People are usually infectious 1-2 days before onset of rash and until all blisters have formed crusts (usually 5-7 days).

### What are the signs and symptoms?

Chicken pox starts with 'sudden onset of fever, some cough and a lack of energy. A skin rash appears soon after as small raised red spots. These may be only a few or many and while most common on the covered parts, can spread over the whole body. In a few hours the spots form blisters that soon burst to leave open sores, which then scab over in 3 or 4 days. Several crops of these blisters may come out over a period of days, so that at any one time there may be sores in various stages of development. Full recovery usually takes 7 – 10 days after the symptoms first appear.

### Treatment

Usually, the only treatment available is for the symptoms. Calamine lotion or an antihistamine medicine like phenergan may ease the itch from the rash. A daily bath in tepid water is recommended, then dry by patting with a clean, soft towel rather than rubbing.

- Rest and plenty of fluids are important.
- Children should avoid scratching as this increases the risk of secondary bacterial infection and possible scarring.
- Paracetamol may be helpful but pain relieving **medicines containing aspirin should not be given to children with chickenpox because it can increase the risk of serious complications.**
- Antibiotics are of no use against viruses like chickenpox, but may be needed if a bacterial infection also develops.
- Antiviral medications may be prescribed by a doctor, but are used only in adolescents and adults who have severe disease. They must be started within the first 3 days of the rash appearing (preferably day 1).

## Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Yes you will need to stay home and avoid contact with other people for one week from the date of appearance of the rash until all the blisters have crusted over.

## How is spread prevented?

Cover the nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, dispose of used tissues, wash hands carefully after contact, and don't share eating utensils, food and drinking cups.

- Keep those with chickenpox away from school, pre-school or work until all the blisters have crusted, and the person feels well.
- Pregnant women should avoid contact with cases of chickenpox, as infection can harm both the mother and the unborn baby. A doctor should be contacted immediately if a pregnant woman develops symptoms.

One dose of the chickenpox vaccine is funded for:

- Children at aged 15 months (for those who were born or after 1 April 2016); or
- Previously unvaccinated children turning 11 years old on or after 1 July 2017 who have not previously had chickenpox.

Two doses of the vaccine are funded for a range of groups who are more prone to severe infection.

The vaccine can be given from 9 months of age but is only funded for the above groups.

## Does having Chickenpox mean I will get Shingles later in life?

Shingles is caused by the reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus and can only occur in people who have had chickenpox previously. Consequently it is more common in older people. Shingles is characterised by the development of a painful rash with groups of blisters and sores. The rash generally occurs in a band on one side of the body or on part of the head overlaying the nerves where the virus had been dormant. The rash may last for 3 to 5 weeks pain can continue for even longer. The virus can be spread to others by direct contact with the moist shingles rash. It is therefore desirable to stay away from school/work unless, the rash can be covered up by clothing & the blisters have dried up

## For further information please contact:



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*Thanks to Community and Public Health for the information in this fact sheet*