



# Chickenpox and shingles (*varicella and herpes zoster*)

## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an acute and highly contagious viral infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus.

## How is it spread?

The virus may be transmitted by direct person to person contact, via droplet or airborne spread of respiratory secretions, or by contact with articles infected with the respiratory secretions or blister fluid of an infected case.

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms generally develop between 2 to 3 weeks, with the average being 14 to 16 days, after the person is exposed.

Chickenpox begins with fever, fatigue and loss of appetite followed by a generalised rash a day or so later.

The rash is more concentrated over the trunk, face and scalp and starts as itchy red spots but rapidly progresses to blisters. The blisters last 3 to 4 days before turning into scabs and drying out. Several crops of blisters will appear over a period of days, resulting in various stages of development present at any one time.

Healthy adults and children generally recover within 10 days.

## How serious is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is usually a disease of childhood, with about 90% of cases occurring in the under 15 year age group. For most children, chickenpox is a mild illness of short duration with complete recovery.

The rash may be very itchy and scratching can result in secondary bacterial skin infection.

Children with weakened immune systems are at risk of developing more serious, and potentially life threatening complications such as pneumonia or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Although usually a childhood illness, previously uninfected adults can develop the disease and are at greater risk of severe disease and complications such as pneumonia or encephalitis.

There is a small chance of damage to the unborn baby if women develop chickenpox during pregnancy, particularly between 13 and 20 weeks. Previously uninfected pregnant women who have been in contact with a person with chickenpox should see their doctor.

Babies are particularly at risk if their mother develops chickenpox 5 days before or within 2 days after delivery.

## What is the infectious period?

A person is infectious from 2 days prior to onset of the rash until the blisters have all crusted into scabs, usually about 5 days after they appear.

## What is the treatment?

Specific antiviral treatment for both chickenpox and shingles is available, however it is reserved for those with severe disease or at risk for severe disease.

The risk of further infection through scratching can be reduced by use of anti-itch soaps and lotions and by keeping fingernails short. Paracetamol can be used to reduce fever, and the child should be encouraged to drink plenty of fluids.

Aspirin must not be given to young children and adolescents due to the risk of developing Reyes

Syndrome, a severe condition associated with aspirin use for viral infections.

## How can chickenpox be prevented?

Free varicella vaccine was introduced in November 2005 for all infants at 18 months of age (born on or after 1 May 2004). The vaccine is also delivered as part of a school vaccination program to all adolescents in Year 8 who have no history or prior vaccination or chickenpox disease. Parents of children born before 1 May 2004 who are not yet eligible for free vaccine as part of this program can purchase the vaccine privately with a doctor's prescription.

Vaccination is also recommended for non-immune adults, particularly those in high-risk occupations (such as health care workers, teachers and workers in child-care services); for non-immune women prior to pregnancy; for non-immune parents of young children and for non-immune household contacts of immunosuppressed persons. If the person receiving the vaccine is over 14 years of age, 2 doses of vaccine administered 1 month apart are required. Pregnancy is a contraindication to vaccination and should be avoided for 1 month after vaccination.

It is safe to immunise people who may have previously had chickenpox disease or vaccination.

People not previously infected with chickenpox can be administered varicella vaccine if given, preferably within 3 days, and up to 5 days after exposure to chicken pox. Those at high risk of complications from the infection eg. people with leukaemia, young babies or pregnant women, should seek medical advice if they have been exposed to a case of chickenpox or shingles. Administering Zoster Immunoglobulin (ZIG) to this group is effective in preventing or reducing the severity of chickenpox if given within 96 hours of exposure to the infection.

## How can it be controlled?

People with chickenpox should not attend child care, preschool, school or work until fully

recovered or for at least 5 days after the rash first appears or longer if blisters are still present.

Note: once all remaining blisters have become scabs exclusion is no longer required.

Hands should be thoroughly washed after contact with an infected person or soiled articles such as linen, toys or utensils. Hand-washing after blowing or wiping the noses of affected children is also required. Immediate disposal of tissues is recommended.

Food, drinks and utensils should not be shared.

## Shingles

The chickenpox virus also causes shingles (herpes zoster). Shingles occurs when the virus, which may have been present but inactive in a person's body for some time, becomes activated. Shingles occurs more frequently in the elderly. It is characterised by a blistering rash, usually associated with severe pain, localised to one site on one side of the body.

The virus is present in the shingles blister fluid. Direct contact with this fluid can cause chickenpox in a non immune person. There is no airborne droplet spread from cases of shingles.

## For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control.

Further information on immunisation in the NT including the Childhood Vaccination Schedule is available from:

<http://www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc>

Darwin	8922 8044
Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0359
Tennant Creek	8962 4259
Alice Springs	8951 7907

Disease Control fact sheets on various topics are available by contacting your nearest centre or from our web site at <http://www.nt.gov.au/health/publications>