

Facts about chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a very common childhood infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is most common in children and is usually mild. When adults get it, however, they can get very sick.

Chickenpox is dangerous for people with immune system problems, such as leukemia, or for people who are taking drugs that weaken the immune system, such as steroids.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox begins with a fever, followed in a day or two by a rash that can be very itchy. The rash starts with red spots that soon turn into fluid-filled blisters. Some people have only a few blisters; others can have as many as 500. These blisters dry up and form scabs in 4 or 5 days.

How is it spread?

Chickenpox spreads easily. It is most contagious on the day before the rash appears.

- It spreads from person to person through direct contact with the virus. You can get chickenpox if you touch a blister or the liquid from a blister. You can also get chickenpox if you touch the saliva of a person who has chickenpox. The virus enters the body by the nose or mouth and can make you sick, too.
- It can also be spread to you through the air if you are near someone with chickenpox who is coughing or sneezing.
- If your child has been in contact and contracted the virus, symptoms of the illness will appear **two to three weeks** after this contact.

Is there a vaccine against chickenpox?

Yes. The vaccine has been on the immunisation schedule since November 2005. Immunised children would have received it at 18 months of age after this date. There was a catch-up program for secondary school students in Year 7 from that date but parents will need to check records to confirm their children received it.

If your child has not had the vaccination and you wish to protect them from this disease, contact your GP.

Can you catch chickenpox again once you have had it?

In most cases, getting chickenpox once means you will not get it again. This is called lifelong immunity. However, in rare cases, a person gets it again but the infection is usually mild.

Can children with chickenpox go to child care or school?

If your child develops the chickenpox rash, they should stay at home for a period of 5 days or until the blistered rash dries and scabs over. After this stage – the healing scabs are not infectious and if feeling well enough to participate in school activities, they can resume classes as normal.

For further information, check out the Royal Children's Hospital Site (rch.org.au) and tap on the Kids Health Info link, which has some great information about all child health related topics.