



# Chickenpox

## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is a common childhood infection that can also affect adults. Chickenpox spreads easily from person to person, through:

- Air
- Saliva (fluids in the mouth)
- Touching fluid from a chickenpox blister, then touching your mouth, nose or eyes

## What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox usually begins with a fever, followed by a rash in 1 or 2 days. The rash starts on the chest, back or stomach and spreads to other body areas. It usually starts with red spots that soon become fluid-filled blisters. New spots appear over the next 2 or 3 days. The blisters then scab over within a few days. The rash is very itchy and may be painful. Chickenpox spreads most easily 1 or 2 days before the rash appears. A person may spread chickenpox to others for 5 days after the rash first appears or until all blisters have crusted over.

## How serious is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is usually mild, but it can sometimes cause:

- High fever
- Severe rash
- Serious lung infections (pneumonia)
- Brain inflammation (encephalitis)

## I have been exposed to chickenpox, what should I do?

Check vaccination records to make sure you or your child are up to date with vaccinations (if you are unsure, check with your healthcare provider)

Chickenpox most often develops 14 to 16 days after a person has been exposed to the virus. Monitor yourself or your child for signs and symptoms for 21 days after exposure.

Contact your healthcare provider right away to let them know of the exposure if:

- You are pregnant and have never had chickenpox or have never been vaccinated against chickenpox. Chickenpox can be very serious for an unborn baby.
- Your child is under 1 year of age.
- You have a weak immune system (from disease or cancer treatment).
- You or your child's symptoms do not improve, or you have any concerns.

## **Is there treatment for chickenpox?**

If your child gets chickenpox, do not give aspirin [acetylsalicylic acid (ASA)] or any products that contain aspirin. Aspirin increases the risk of getting Reye's syndrome, a severe illness that can damage the liver and brain. If you want to control your child's fever, use acetaminophen (for example, Tylenol, Tempra, Panadol).

## **How do I protect myself against chickenpox?**

The best way to protect yourself and your family from chickenpox is by receiving the chickenpox vaccine. The varicella vaccine is included in the routine immunization schedule and is given to children at 15 months of age and again at 4 to 6 years of age.

If you or your child did not receive the chickenpox vaccine and have not had chickenpox before, please discuss with your health care provider.

## **What is Shingles?**

Shingles looks like chickenpox and is caused by the same virus, but the rash is usually found on one part of the body. Shingles occurs in people who have already had chickenpox. It is possible to get chickenpox from someone with shingles through direct contact with the fluid in a blister of the person with shingles. It is not possible to get shingles from a person with chickenpox.

For more information visit [OttawaPublicHealth.ca](https://OttawaPublicHealth.ca).

April 2024