

# Chickenpox

**Chickenpox is a virus infection that causes a blistering and very itchy skin rash. Complications involving other parts of the body, although rare, can develop and can be serious. Chickenpox is usually a childhood illness, but it can occur in adults. Chickenpox vaccine can prevent chickenpox.**

## Cause

Chickenpox is caused by a herpes virus called *varicella zoster*.

It is spread by moisture droplets breathed out into the air (e.g. coughing or sneezing) or by the fluid from chickenpox and shingles blisters. Chickenpox is very contagious and spreads easily from person to person.

## Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of chicken pox begin between 10 and 21 days after the person is infected.

- Chickenpox may start with feelings of being unwell, including headache, runny nose, mild fever and cough, up to three days before the rash appears.



- The chickenpox rash begins as small, red spots or bumps that quickly become very itchy blisters. The blisters usually last 3–5 days, then dry out to form crusts (scabs). The crusts take several days to heal.
- The rash usually starts on the face, back and chest then spreads. New spots can continue to appear for up to five days.

- The number of blisters can vary from a few on the trunk, to covering the whole body. They can occur anywhere, including the scalp, eyelids, mouth, throat, anus and vagina.
- All three stages of the rash (spots, blisters and crusts) may be present on the body at the same time.
- Sometimes a chicken pox blister leaves a scar when it heals.
- Blisters can become infected by bacteria. Infected blisters are more likely to leave a scar.

Chickenpox symptoms are usually more severe for adults and people with a weakened immune system.

Complications of chickenpox include pneumonia, brain infection and bacterial skin infection. If a woman has chickenpox in the first or second trimester of pregnancy, the chickenpox can damage her unborn baby. Chickenpox late in pregnancy can cause severe illness in the newborn child.

## How contagious is chickenpox?

- A person with chickenpox is contagious from 1–2 days before the rash appears until all the blisters have dried and crusted.
- People with chickenpox should not go to child care, school or work until all the blisters have dried – usually at least 5 days after the rash first appears.
- A person who has had chickenpox has usually become immune to it, and will not catch it again.

- After chickenpox, some of the virus lies inactive in nerve cells in the body. This virus can reactivate later to cause shingles (also known as herpes zoster).
- A person who has not had chickenpox, and has not had the chickenpox vaccine, can catch chickenpox from a person with shingles.

## Preventing chickenpox

Chickenpox vaccine (an injection) can protect against both chickenpox and shingles.

### Children

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends at least one dose of chickenpox vaccine (also known as varicella vaccine or VZV) for non-immune children aged 12 months to 13 years.

- The Australian National Immunisation Program (NIP) provides one dose of chickenpox vaccine free of charge to all children at 12–18 months of age.
- The NIP provides a free ‘catch-up’ vaccination for children aged 10–13 years who have not had the vaccine and who have not had chickenpox.
- The NIP free vaccine is available from local doctors and immunisation clinics.
- Children aged between 18 months and 10 years cannot have the free vaccine, but can arrange vaccination with their doctor.

A second dose of vaccine can give increased protection, but is not provided free of charge by the NIP. It can be arranged privately with a doctor.

## People over 14 years of age

The NHMRC recommends two doses of chickenpox vaccine for non-immune people over 14 years of age, especially child care workers, teachers, healthcare workers, parents of young children, household contacts of people with a weakened immune system and women planning a pregnancy. Ask a doctor.

## Treatment

Treatment for chickenpox aims to relieve itching, fever and discomfort and includes:

- cool, wet compresses applied to the blisters
- cool baths with a bath oil, sodium bicarbonate or oatmeal added to the water to soothe blisters
- hydrogel wound dressings to soothe lesions and help healing
- creams and lotions to relieve itch
- antihistamine tablets and syrups to relieve itch
- soothing mouthwashes for blisters in the mouth and throat
- paracetamol to reduce pain and fever (a person with chickenpox should not take aspirin).

Ask a pharmacist for advice.

A doctor may prescribe antiviral medicines for a person with complications or a weakened immune system.

## Important

Most people recover from chickenpox without any problems. However, seek medical advice if:

- blisters get very red, warm or sore, or contain pus
- high fever, severe headaches or vomiting develop
- breathing problems develop
- joint pain develops
- you also have a condition or are taking medicine that weakens your immune system (e.g. chemotherapy, radiotherapy, HIV).

A person with chickenpox should keep away from:

- a person who has never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine
- a person who has a weak immune system
- babies under 12 months
- pregnant women.

## Self care

- Rest as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of fluid, even if blisters in the mouth and throat make swallowing difficult. Adults and children should drink enough water every day to satisfy their thirst and keep their urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).
- Resist scratching blisters, to reduce the chances of bacterial infection and scarring. Keep nails clean and short, to help avoid scratching. The itch may be relieved by gently patting the lesions.
- Use good personal hygiene (e.g. cover your mouth if coughing or sneezing, wash hands often, bathe regularly, do not share food or eating utensils).

## For more information

### **New Zealand Dermatological Society**

Website: [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

### **Immunise Australia Program**

Phone: 1800 671 811

Website: [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on  
CMI leaflets.

### **NPS Medicine Wise**

#### **Medicines Information Line**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26  
from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.***

## Related fact cards

» *Childhood Immunisation*

» *Shingles*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: