

# Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). It causes a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness, and fever. Chickenpox can be serious, especially in babies, adults, and people with weakened immune systems. It spreads easily from infected people to others who have never had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine. Chickenpox spreads in the air through coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread by touching or breathing in the virus particles that come from chickenpox blisters.

The best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. Before the vaccine, about 4 million people would get chickenpox each year in the United States. Also, about 10,600 people were hospitalized and 100 to 150 died each year as a result of chickenpox.

## Signs & Symptoms

Anyone who hasn't had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine can get the disease. Chickenpox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5-10 days.

The classic symptom of chickenpox is a rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters that eventually turn into scabs. The rash may first show up on the face, chest, and back then spread to the rest of the body, including inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area. It usually takes about one week for all the blisters to become scabs.

Other typical symptoms that may begin to appear 1-2 days before rash include:

- high fever
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- headache

Children usually miss 5 to 6 days of school or childcare due to their chickenpox.

## Vaccinated Persons

Some people who have been vaccinated against chickenpox can still get the disease. However, the symptoms are usually milder with fewer blisters and mild or no fever. About 25% to 30% of vaccinated people who get chickenpox will develop illness as serious as chickenpox in unvaccinated persons.

## People at Risk for Severe Chickenpox

Some people who get chickenpox may have more severe symptoms and may be at higher risk for complications. For more information, see complications.

## **Transmission**

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. The virus spreads easily from people with chickenpox to others who have never had the disease or received the chickenpox vaccine. The virus spreads in the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by touching or breathing in the virus particles that come from chickenpox blisters.

Chickenpox can also be spread from people with shingles. Varicella-zoster virus also causes shingles. A person with shingles can spread the virus to others who have never had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine. In these cases, the exposed person might develop chickenpox. For more information about how shingles spreads, see Transmission.

### **When Is a Person Contagious?**

A person with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1 to 2 days before they get the rash until all their chickenpox blisters have formed scabs.

It takes from 10 to 21 days after exposure to a person with chickenpox or shingles for someone to develop chickenpox.

If a person vaccinated for chickenpox gets the disease, they can still spread it to others.

For most people, getting chickenpox once provides immunity for life. However, for a few people, they can get chickenpox more than once, although this is not common.

### **“Chickenpox Parties” – Don’t Take the Chance**

“Chickenpox parties” have been held to increase a child’s chance of getting chickenpox while he or she is still young. Chickenpox can be serious, especially for infants and even for some children. So, it is not worth taking the chance of exposing them to chickenpox. The best way to protect infants and children against chickenpox is to get them vaccinated. Read more about the chickenpox vaccine.

Pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for serious chickenpox disease. They should stay away from people with chickenpox and should not go to chickenpox parties.