

Varicella (Chicken Pox)

Chicken pox (Varicella) is a highly communicable viral disease that occurs most often during the winter and spring. Once you have had chicken pox, you are usually immune to it. However, if you have never had the disease, you can get it at any age.

SYMPTOMS

If you have chicken pox, you may have a slight fever and cold-like symptoms. However, you may not realize that you have the disease until you notice a red rash on your face, trunk, scalp, or in your mouth. Later, you may find lesions on your arms and legs. Your rash will go through three stages: initially, it will be a red spot, next a blister (vesicle), and finally a scab. You may have "old" spots that are healing and "new" spots that are just beginning to blister. Your rash will probably itch. In fact, it may begin to itch before you notice the rash. Scratching your lesions can lead to infection and the development of crater-like scars. After your lesions have healed, you may notice "red spots." These spots are not scars and will fade within a few weeks.

HOW IS CHICKEN POX SPREAD?

Chicken pox can be spread by direct person-to-person contact droplet or airborne spread of vesicle fluid or secretions of the respiratory tract, such as coughing and sneezing. It is contagious from 1-2 days before the onset of the rash and may be spread until all lesions have dried up and become scabs. After you are exposed to the disease, it may take from 10 days to three weeks before you notice a rash. These two facts may make it hard for you to identify when and where you were exposed to the illness.

HOW CAN THIS DISEASE BE PREVENTED?

For those individuals who do not have a known history of varicella, a blood titer is recommended, followed by the live varicella vaccine if the titer is negative. The chicken pox virus can be spread through contact with fluid from your blisters. It can also live for long periods of time on inanimate objects. Therefore, to reduce your chance of spreading this disease, use the following guidelines:

- To avoid spreading the illness, stay in your room or apartment until all your lesions have dried up (approx. 5-7 days). Do not use public transportation, attend classes or social events. You may have visitors who have had chicken pox in the past. Avoid friends who have not had the disease.
- Do not share eating utensils, food, smoking materials or allow others to drink after you. Use plastic utensils and paper plates. Place all paper products that you handle (including tissues) in a plastic bag for disposal. You should also keep your own supply of toilet items (including soap) that are stored away from the items used by others.

- Your used bed sheets are another potential source of infection. Place these linens in a plastic bag. At the washer, you or a friend (preferably one who has had chicken pox) can dump the sheets from the bag without touching them. Be sure to use hot water, a strong detergent and a hot dryer setting. After the sheets are washed, they no longer carry the disease.

Non-immune students who are exposed to chicken pox and are pregnant or have some form of immunosuppression may consider receiving varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG). The expense of this vaccine limits its use to cases at "special risk." VZIG is most effective if given within three days of exposure.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF CHICKEN POX?

Chicken pox can lead to fetal death if the disease is acquired by a pregnant woman within four days before the baby's birth. Although young adults are less susceptible to varicella than children, their chance of experiencing serious complications is much higher.

Therefore, YOU SHOULD REPORT THE FOLLOWING SYMPTOMS TO YOUR PHYSICIAN IMMEDIATELY: severe chest pain, difficult or labored breathing, blood when you cough, sudden onset of severe headache, unexplained drowsiness (some medications, including decongestants and medications to relieve itching, can cause drowsiness) or severe vomiting.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I HAVE CHICKEN POX?

For older adolescents and adults, many physicians recommend starting on oral acyclovir within 24 hours of development of rash; so contact your physician right away to see if you are a candidate. Acyclovir may decrease the total number of lesions, the time to cessation of newly-formed lesions, and the need for pain relievers and fever reducers. It may also reduce the possibility of serious complications. The following measures may help you feel more comfortable:

- Cool compresses and cool to tepid baths with baking soda and calamine lotion can help soothe itching.
- DO NOT SCRATCH YOUR LESIONS.
- Using a humidifier, sleeping with your head elevated, and taking decongestants can help relieve your stuffy nose.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol, Panadol, Datriil) can help relieve body aches and fevers. AVOID ASPIRIN PRODUCTS.

- Cool juice, popsicles and cool liquids can soothe your throat. Avoid spicy foods, citrus drinks, chocolate and hot sauces.
- Clean cotton sheets can increase your comfort. Wear cotton T-shirts or gowns. Polyester can be too warm and other fabrics can irritate your lesions.

ADDITIONALLY:

- Stay confined to your room until the lesions are all scabbed over. Keep any follow-up appointment before returning to class.
- Make sure any visitor is aware you have chicken pox and allow only visitors that have had chicken pox or are know to be immune.
- Do not allow any visitor who may be pregnant or have an immunosuppressed illness, such as cancer, AIDS, Lupus, organ transplants.
- You need to make food service arrangements. Do not go to the dining area.
- When showering, use the community bathroom when there are the least number of other people present.
- Wear a mask when going to and from the bathroom – leave unless you are showering or brushing your teeth. A mask is not necessary when you are confined to your room.
- Notify your instructors that you will be confined for 7-10 days.
- Do not leave your residence room unless there is a fire. You should not go to public places such as movie theaters, restaurants, or use buses or other public transportation.
- Follow any instructions given to you by your provider as to medication, showering, diet and return visits.
- When you have been cleared by a provider, wash all bed linens and personal clothing items in a washer with hot, soapy water. Keep all items separate from other laundry.