Fact Sheet: Chickenpox

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious rash illness caused by the varicella virus. It occurs most frequently in the winter and early spring. Once a person has had chickenpox, they generally will not get it again. However, this virus remains dormant in a person's body and years later may reactivate as herpes zoster (shingles).

What are the symptoms?

- Sudden onset of fever
- General discomfort
- Raised, watery blisters, surrounded by a red area, which then dry, crust over and form scabs
- Rash may first appear on the upper body, then arms, legs, and face
- New blisters, open blisters, and crusts are often present at the same time

How is it spread?

Chickenpox is spread by direct person-to-person contact. The spread can occur with droplets from the nose, throat, and mouth through sneezing and coughing, and with items freshly soiled by discharges from an infected person's blisters, nose, or mouth. An infected person can spread chickenpox from 1-2 days before the rash begins until all the lesions have dried or scabbed. Chickenpox generally develops 10-21 days after exposure (average is 13-17 days).

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

How is it treated?

- If you think you have chickenpox, see your health care provider for treatment recommendations. Antiviral medications are recommended for people with chicken pox who are more likely to develop serious disease including: those over 12 years of age, those with chronic skin or lung disease, people receiving steroid therapy, and pregnant women.
- Rest and drink plenty of fluids. A non-aspirin product (acetaminophen, ibuprofen) can be used to reduce fever and discomfort. **Aspirin should not be used in children with viral illnesses since there have been cases associated with the development of Reye Syndrome.**
- Do not rub off scabs (this may cause scarring and infection).
- Cut fingernails short and keep them clean to reduce infection caused from scratching.

How is it prevented?

- People infected with the disease should remain home to avoid exposing others.
- A vaccine to protect people against chickenpox is recommended for persons 12 months and older. Children, adolescents, and adults should get 2 doses of vaccine.
- Pregnant women should not get the chickenpox vaccine since it contains a live virus; they should wait to get the vaccine until after they have given birth.
- Persons who have previously had chickenpox disease do not need to be vaccinated.
- Use a tissue to catch sneezes and coughs and throw away used tissues in a trashcan.
- Chickenpox can cause serious complications for some persons including: newborns, people with an immune deficiency, cancer, and those who take steroids. These individuals should avoid contact with persons infected with chickenpox.

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