

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 may remain dormant in a person's body and years later reactivate as herpes zoster (shingles).

What are the symptoms?

- Sudden onset of slight 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 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 up to five days (usually 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 call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

How is it treated?

- If you think you have chickenpox, see your health care provider for treatment recommendations.
- 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 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. New recommendations are that everyone should get 2 doses of vaccine. Receiving vaccine within 72 hours of exposure may prevent or at least lessen the symptoms. Persons who have previously had chickenpox 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 or cancer, and those who take steroids. These individuals should avoid people with chickenpox.
- Pregnant women should not get the chickenpox vaccine since it contains a live virus.

