

Chickenpox Fact Sheet



What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common childhood viral illness. Most outbreaks occur in the winter and early spring.

Who gets chickenpox?

Chickenpox is most common in children under 15 years old, but can occur at any age. Once a person gets chickenpox, they usually won't get it again. The chickenpox vaccine works in most people. Those who get chickenpox after vaccination usually have a milder case of it.

It is possible to get chickenpox from having the vaccine. It is usually a milder form of the illness.

How do you get chickenpox?

Chickenpox is highly contagious. It is spread in one of the following ways:

- By direct contact with an infected person, usually through fluid from broken blisters.
- Through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes.
- By touching items freshly soiled by discharges from an infected person's blisters, nose or mouth.

A person who has chickenpox is contagious one to two days before the rash starts and for six days after the rash appears. They are no longer contagious when new sores stop appearing and all sores have crusted over. This is usually about 5 days after the rash begins.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

The first symptoms are:

- Slight fever
- Tiredness
- Weakness

These are soon followed by an itchy, blister-like rash. The rash may first appear on the upper body, then arms, legs, and face. The blisters eventually dry, crust over, and form scabs.

Other symptoms may include:

- Chills
- Headache
- Loss of appetite
- Fussiness

Symptoms usually start between 14 and 16 days after being exposed.

The Health Department does not diagnosis chickenpox.

How is chickenpox treated?

- Mild cases require only rest and plenty of fluids.
- Calamine lotion and oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching.
- Itching may be decreased by taking an antihistamine such as oral Benadryl.
- Use Tylenol to reduce fever and relieve minor aches and pains. Children and teens should **not** take aspirin.
- Keep fingernails trimmed short and clean to reduce the chance of getting an infection from scratching the blisters.

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When should my child get the chickenpox vaccine?

All children should be routinely vaccinated with a first dose between 12 and 15 months of age and the second dose between the ages of 4 and 6. Healthy people over the age of 13 who have no history of chickenpox and have never been immunized against the disease should get two doses of the vaccine four to eight weeks apart.

Should a child with chickenpox stay home from school?

A child with chickenpox should be kept home from daycare or school for at least six days after the rash first appeared or until the blisters have crusted over, whichever comes first.

When are other children excluded from school?

To control transmission in a group activity setting (daycare/pre-school/school), KCHD will recommend exclusion of children who do not have documentation of age-appropriate vaccination (1 dose for pre-school aged children, 2 doses for school aged children). These recommendations will be made when there is 1 case of laboratory-confirmed chickenpox or 2 doctor-diagnosed cases in a group setting. Children will be excluded until 21 days after the last identified case. Children may return to the group setting immediately upon getting vaccinated or providing other acceptable documentation of immunity.

Should children and at-risk people living in a home with a pregnant woman at risk be vaccinated?

Yes, at risk children living in a household with pregnant woman at risk should be vaccinated.

Pregnant women who have never had chickenpox are at risk of getting chickenpox during pregnancy. A small number of women who get chickenpox in the first or second trimester can have babies with birth defects known as “congenital varicella syndrome.” In addition, chickenpox may be more severe in pregnant women than in others. This puts the woman at risk of severe complications.

Vaccinating close contacts of a susceptible pregnant woman is the most effective way to protect her from disease. Although there is a small risk that a vaccinated person could get a vaccine rash and spread the vaccine strain virus to the pregnant woman, this risk is much smaller than the risk than she could contract “natural” varicella.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about chickenpox or think you may have it, call your health care provider.

