

FACT SHEET

CHICKEN POX

Chickenpox is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus called varicella zoster. Before the vaccine that protects against chickenpox became available in 1995, it was one of the most common disease of childhood, affecting almost all children before the age of 9 years.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Chickenpox begins with a fever, aches and pains. Within 1 or 2 days your child will get a rash. The rash is usually itchy and can make your child uncomfortable. It appears on the scalp and face, spreading quickly down the body and onto the arms and legs. The spots start as flat pink spots that turn into small water blisters. New spots will form even after others turn into blisters. Some children only get a few blisters, but others can have as many as 500. Blisters dry up and form scabs in 4 or 5 days. Most children lose their appetite and have a headache during the first few days.

TREATMENT

If your child gets chickenpox, do not give aspirin or any products that contain aspirin. Taking aspirin increases the risk of getting Reye's syndrome (a severe illness can damage the liver and brain). If you want to control your child's fever, use acetaminophen (Tylenol, Tempra, Panadol and others).

Encourage your child not to scratch. Scratching can cause infection from bacteria that get into the skin. Adding baking soda to bathwater can be soothing. Your doctor may recommend a cream to help reduce the itch.

Infants with chickenpox, and older children or adults with a severe disease may be treated with antiviral drugs.

CAN MY CHILD GO TO SCHOOL?

Many schools and daycare centres have policies that require children with chickenpox to stay home for 5 days after the rash appears. The goal is to protect other children from the disease. Unfortunately, this does not stop chickenpox from spreading. Chickenpox is contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears, and most infectious from 12 to 24 hours before the rash appears. It spreads through the air, not just by direct contact with the rash. If your child is too sick to take part in regular activities or if he has a fever, he should stay home.

WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS?

As uncomfortable as chickenpox may be, the disease clears up completely without complications in most children. Bacterial infections do occur in some children. These are usually mild skin infections, but at times the infection can be more severe and involve the tissues under the skin and the muscles. In these cases, antibiotics and surgery are needed to control the bacteria.



WHEN TO CALL YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Most children with chickenpox do not need to be seen by a pediatrician. However, contact your pediatrician if your child has a high fever (temperature greater than 38.9°C) or if the fever lasts for more than 4 days.

Also, notify your pediatrician if your child has any signs of a bacterial infection, such as part of the rash becoming extremely red, tender, and warm, or if your child's symptoms seem much worse.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professionals to make sure this information is right for your child.

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