

Chickenpox (varicella)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an acute and highly infectious viral infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is sometimes called varicella.

How is it spread?

The virus may be spread through the air by talking, coughing or sneezing or by touching materials that are contaminated with virus particles from blister fluid of an infected person.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms generally develop between 2-3 weeks, after the person is exposed. Chickenpox begins with fever, fatigue and loss of appetite followed by a generalised rash a day or so later. The rash is more concentrated over the trunk, face and scalp and starts as itchy red spots but rapidly progresses to blisters. The blisters last 3-4 days before turning into scabs and drying out. Different crops of blisters will appear over several days. Healthy adults and children generally recover within 10 days.

How serious is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is usually a disease of childhood, with most cases occurring in the under 15 year age group. In children it is usually a mild illness of short duration with complete recovery. A common side effect of chickenpox is a secondary bacterial skin infection due to scratching of the itchy rash.

Adults, adolescents and people with weakened immune systems are at risk of developing more serious disease and the potentially life threatening complications such as pneumonia or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Pregnant women and newborn babies are at risk of severe side effects if they are exposed to chickenpox. All women who develop chickenpox in their pregnancy or in the first few days after the delivery of their baby should seek urgent medical advice. Pregnant women with no history of chickenpox or history of immunisation who have been in contact with a person with chickenpox should see their doctor as soon as possible to discuss options for protection.

What is the infectious period?

A person is infectious from 2 days prior to onset of the rash until the blisters have all crusted into scabs, usually about 5 days after they appear.

What is the treatment?

Most people do not require medical intervention. Rest and fluids are encouraged. Reducing the risk of skin infection by scratching can be aided/helped by the use of over the counter anti-itch soaps and lotions and by keeping fingernails short.

Paracetamol can be used to reduce fever. Aspirin must not be given to young children and adolescents due to the risk of developing Reye Syndrome, a severe condition associated with aspirin use for viral infections. Specific antiviral medication is available for chickenpox however it is reserved for those with severe disease or at risk for severe disease. A doctor's prescription is required.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

Chickenpox vaccination has been available free in Australia since 2005. It is given to children at 18 months of age as part of the National Immunisation schedule. Healthy adolescents (≥ 14 years of age) and adults need 2 doses of varicella vaccine, at least 4 weeks apart if not previously vaccinated or had previous disease. This is because the response to a single dose of varicella vaccine decreases with age and does not provide adequate protection.

People not immune to chickenpox and exposed to the disease can be administered chickenpox vaccine, preferably within 3 days, and up to 5 days after exposure to chickenpox to prevent or reduce the severity of disease.

For those uncertain about past immunisation or past disease it should be noted that it is safe to immunise people who may have previously had chickenpox disease or vaccination.

Who should not get chickenpox vaccine?

The vaccine should not be given to pregnant women, immunosuppressed people and children under 12 months of age. Those at high risk of complications from infection with varicella-zoster virus e.g. people with leukaemia, young babies or pregnant women should seek medical advice if they have been exposed to a case of chickenpox or shingles. Administering zoster immunoglobulin (ZIG) to this group is effective in preventing or reducing the severity of chickenpox if given within 96 hours of exposure to the infection.

How can it be controlled?

People with chickenpox should not attend child care, preschool, school or work until fully recovered or for at least 5 days after the rash first appears or longer if blisters are still present. Note: once all remaining blisters have become scabs exclusion is no longer required.

Encourage coughing or sneezing into the inner elbow rather than the hand and if tissues are used put them in the bin straight away. Hands should be thoroughly washed after handling tissues, contact with an infected person or after blowing or wiping the noses of affected children. Towels, food, drinks and eating utensils should not be shared while people remain infectious.

Contact

For more information contact the Public Health Unit's Centre for Disease Control in your region.

The full list of contacts of contacts can be found at [NT Health](#).

| Location | Address | Phone | Fax | Email |
|---------------|---|--------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Darwin | Ground Floor, Building 4 Royal Darwin Hospital Rocklands Drive Tiwi NT 0810 | (08) 8922 8044 1800 008 002 | (08) 8922 8310 | CDCSurveillance.DARWIN@nt.gov.au |
| Katherine | O'Keef House Katherine Hospital Gorge Road Katherine NT 0850 | (08) 8973 9049 | (08) 8973 9048 | CDC.Katherine@nt.gov.au |
| Tennant Creek | Schmidt Street Tennant Creek NT 0860 | (08) 8962 4259 | (08) 8962 4420 | CDC.Barkly@nt.gov.au |
| Alice Springs | Disease Control Unit Lower Ground Floor Eurilpa House, 25 Todd Street Alice Springs NT 0870 | (08) 8951 7540 | (08) 8951 7900 | CDC.alicesprings@nt.gov.au |
| Nhulunbuy | Corner Mathew Flinders Way and Chesterfield Court Nhulunbuy NT 0880 | (08) 8987 0357 | (08) 8987 0500 | CDCGove.DoH@nt.gov.au |