UK Health Security Agency

Chickenpox Factsheet

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella zoster virus. It spreads very easily.

- It is most common in children under 10 years old
- It is usually mild in children, but some children can become more unwell
- It can be more serious for:
    - adults
    - pregnant women
    - babies
    - people with weak immune systems (for example, due to illness or medicines that affect the immune system)

Symptoms

Some children may have very mild symptoms or none at all.

Most children have:

- fever (high temperature)
- runny nose or cough
- feeling tired
- an itchy rash

The rash starts as spots which turns into fluid-filled blisters and then dries and forms scabs. New spots can keep appearing for a few days. Spots can be anywhere on the body, in the mouth or on the scalp.

How chickenpox spreads

Chickenpox spreads easily:

- by being in the same room as somebody
- by touching the fluid from the blisters

Chickenpox can spread:

- up to 1 day before the rash appears
- until all spots have dried and scabbed (about 5 days after rash starts)

This is why staying at home is important.

How to protect others

- Keep your child home for at least 5 days after the rash starts, AND until all the spots have formed scabs
- Wash hands regularly

- Avoid close contact with at-risk people
- Have the MMRV vaccine if your child is offered it

Treatments

Most children only need care at home:

- Rest
- Plenty of drinks
- Comfort care for itching
- give your child paracetamol if they have a fever

Some people at higher risk may be offered additional treatment by a healthcare professional.

Most children get better in about 1 to 2 weeks.

When to get medical advice

It's important to trust your instincts if you or your child is unwell. Get medical help if you think you need it.

Get medical advice quickly (call NHS 111) if:

- the symptoms get worse, such as red, hot or painful skin around the spots (redness may be harder to see on brown or black skin)
- your child is not drinking enough or shows signs of dehydration (such as fewer wet nappies, very dry mouth, or no tears when crying)
- you or your child has any other symptoms you're worried about

Chickenpox and scarlet fever

Having chickenpox and scarlet fever in the same household can increase the risk of more serious illness. Seek medical advice if your child with chickenpox becomes more unwell.

Chickenpox and shingles

Chickenpox and shingles are caused by the same virus. If you have had chickenpox, the virus stays quietly in your body. It can come back later in life as shingles.

Shingles is more common in:

- older people
- people with weak immune systems

Further advice

For further information, including images of the rash on different skin types, see: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chickenpox/

Commonly asked questions

Can you catch chickenpox from someone with shingles?

If you haven't had chickenpox or been vaccinated against chickenpox, you can catch it from close contact with the shingles rash.

If you have had chickenpox or been vaccinated, you are very unlikely to catch chickenpox from someone with shingles.

Can you catch shingles from someone with chickenpox or shingles?

No, you cannot catch shingles from someone with either chickenpox or shingles. Shingles is caused by the reactivation of the varicella zoster virus in the body following previous chickenpox infection, which could have happened many years ago.

What should I do if I have contact with someone with chickenpox or shingles?

90% of adults in the UK are immune to chickenpox; many of these people will have had mild infection and may not even know they have had chickenpox. People with a weakened immune system should contact their GP or specialist as soon as possible if they have been in contact with someone with chickenpox or shingles. Pregnant women should contact their GP as soon as possible if they have been in contact with chickenpox or shingles and have no history of having had chickenpox or chickenpox vaccine.