

# Chickenpox - Varicella

- Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella virus. It cannot be treated with antibiotics. Treatment is usually to relieve the symptoms.

It is easily spread by either having direct contact with (ie touching) the person who has chickenpox, or from fluid droplets in the air when they cough. Fever and a rash are the most common signs of chickenpox. A person with chickenpox is infectious to others from one to two days before the rash first appears until the last blisters have dried up. Children and adults of any age can get chickenpox but it is more common in children.

One in 5,000 people who catch chickenpox will develop a brain inflammation called encephalitis, and three in 100,000 will die. A chickenpox vaccination is recommended for children aged 18 months as part of their normal schedule of vaccinations. It is very effective, has few side effects and is free of charge in Victoria.

## Signs and symptoms

- A mild fever.
- Feeling tired and irritable.
- Itching.
- Rash. The rash usually first appears on the chest, back or face. It then can move to other areas of the body including inside the mouth. At first, the rash looks like small pimples. These later become blisters full of fluid.



## How is it spread?

Chickenpox is highly contagious, which means it is very easy to catch. It can be spread by either having direct contact with the person who has chickenpox, from coughed fluids from their chest or by touching the liquid from the blisters. Children with chickenpox are infectious from one to two days before the rash first appears until the last blisters have dried up.

## What to expect

- The rash usually appears from 10 to 21 days after first being exposed to someone who has chickenpox. This time between exposure to getting the rash is called the 'incubation period'.
- Children with a severe infection or with underlying serious medical conditions may be given anti-viral medication.
- Most children with chickenpox are unwell for about five to seven days. Only a few will need to be admitted to hospital.
- Treatment is about controlling the itching from the rash and other symptoms related to the viral illness. There are many medications and creams that you can buy from your local pharmacy to help with the itching.
- Chickenpox is a virus and it can not be treated with antibiotics.
- If your child gets large, sore, red areas around the rash, or becomes more unwell, see your family doctor in case a secondary bacterial infection has developed.

## At home care

It can be difficult to make sure children drink enough when they are unwell. Give sips of drinks, jelly, icy poles, soup and other fluids often. This helps prevent dehydration and controls the fever. Children with chickenpox can feel tired and irritable. Taking paracetamol can help, but do not give your child aspirin.

Children with chickenpox should not go to school or kindergarten until the last blister has dried. A dry blister scab is not infectious. You should tell the school if your child gets chickenpox as there may be other children who need to be immunised or treated.

Someone with chickenpox is infectious to others one to two days before the rash starts until the last blister has dried up. Some members of the family may need to stay away from the child during this infectious stage. This includes people who are on chemotherapy or long term oral steroids, newborn babies and pregnant women who have not had chickenpox before. Most people cannot get chicken pox again if they have already had it.

Children with chickenpox can usually be cared for at home and do not need to see a doctor. If you are concerned, see your family doctor or Maternal and Child Health Nurse.

## Special considerations

- Anyone who is taking long term oral steroids and anyone who is immune compromised (eg on chemotherapy or after an organ transplant), pregnant women or newborns should see their doctor if they think they have been exposed to chickenpox, as they may need treatment to prevent the virus.
- People with skin problems like eczema may also need to speak to a health professional for advice on which creams they can use for the rash.
- Children with chickenpox should not be given aspirin.

## Key points to remember

- Chickenpox is very easy to catch.
- Antibiotics will not cure chickenpox.
- Treatment is usually for the symptoms, such as the rash, not the infection itself.
- The rash usually starts between 10 to 21 days after the first exposure to chickenpox.
- Chickenpox is infectious for one to two days before the rash starts until the last blister has dried.

## For more information

- Talk to your [family doctor](#), [paediatrician](#) , [Maternal and Child Health Nurse](#) or pharmacist.
- Department of Human Services (DHS) [Immunisation Fact Sheets: Chickenpox \(Varicella\) immunisation information](#)
- Department of Infection Control (RCH), Tel: (03) 9345 5740
- **For your doctor:** [Clinical Practice Guideline](#) / [Kids Connect](#)