

# VARICELLA-ZOSTER VIRUS (CHICKENPOX AND SHINGLES) AND PREGNANCY

## What is varicella-zoster?

Varicella-zoster is a herpes virus that causes chickenpox, a common childhood illness. It is highly contagious, but rarely serious for most children. However, if an adult develops chickenpox the illness may be more severe. After a person has had chickenpox, the varicella-zoster virus can remain inactive in the body for many years. Herpes zoster (shingles) occurs when the virus becomes active again.

## What illnesses does varicella-zoster cause?

Chickenpox first occurs as a blister-like skin rash and fever. The sores commonly occur in batches with different stages (bumps, blisters, and sores) present at the same time. The blisters usually scab over in 5 days. Children with weakened immune systems may have blisters occurring for a prolonged time period. Adults can develop severe pneumonia and other serious complications.

Shingles occurs when the virus, which has been inactive for some time, becomes active again. Severe pain and numbness along nerve pathways, commonly on the trunk or on the face, are present. Clusters of blisters appear 1 to 3 days later. The blisters are usually on one side of the body and closer together than in chickenpox. **Shingles does not spread as shingles from one person to another.** If people who have never had chickenpox have contact with the fluid from the shingles blisters, they can develop chickenpox.

## Are chickenpox and shingles serious illnesses?

The symptoms may be more severe in newborns, persons with weakened immune systems, and adults. Serious problems can occur and may include pneumonia (bacterial and viral), brain infection (encephalitis), and kidney problems.

## I've recently been exposed to someone with chickenpox. How will this exposure affect my pregnancy?

If you have already had chickenpox, there is no risk. Most adults in the U.S. (90% to 95%) have had chickenpox and are immune.

If you have never had chickenpox and you get chickenpox during the:

- First half (about 20 weeks) of your pregnancy, there is a very slight risk (0.4% to 2%) for birth defects or miscarriage.
- Second half of your pregnancy, the baby may have infection without having any symptoms and then get shingles (zoster) later in life.
- Five days before to 2 days after the delivery, it is likely the baby will get chickenpox. A preventive treatment is available for these babies; it is called Varicella-Zoster immune globulin (VZIG).

## What should I do about this exposure?

If you have been in contact with someone with chickenpox or shingles or if you have a rash-associated illness that might be chickenpox or shingles, discuss your situation with your healthcare provider. Blood tests may be done to see if you have become infected with the virus or have had the disease in the past. **If you are pregnant and not immune and have been exposed to chickenpox or shingles, call your healthcare provider immediately. You must seek care from a healthcare provider within 72 hours of exposure to benefit from VZIG.**

## VARICELLA-ZOSTER VIRUS AND PREGNANCY

### **I have had a blood test for chickenpox. What do the results of the blood test show?**

The blood test for VZV may show that you:

- Are immune (have already had varicella disease or varicella vaccine) and have no sign of recent infection. You have nothing further to be concerned about.
- Are not immune and have not yet been infected. You may wish to avoid anyone with chickenpox during your pregnancy.
- Have or recently had an infection. You should discuss what the risks are for your stage of pregnancy with your healthcare provider.

### **If I develop chickenpox or shingles, what do I need to do about my pregnancy?**

Talk to your healthcare provider. Recommendations will be made based on the stage of your pregnancy. No cases of fetal infection or damage have been reported for women who develop shingles during pregnancy.

### **Is there a way I can keep from being infected with chickenpox?**

If you are not pregnant and not immune, all adults working with children should know their vaccine history or immune status. If you are not immune, you should be vaccinated. You will receive two doses of varicella (chickenpox) vaccine one month apart.

You should avoid becoming pregnant for at least one month after the last vaccination. **Varicella vaccine should not be given to pregnant women.**

If you are pregnant, have your healthcare provider give you the varicella vaccine after your baby is delivered.

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at (612) 543-5230 or call your local health department.