

CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA)

Reportable to local or state health department

Consult the health department before posting or distributing the Parent/Guardian fact sheet.

Chickenpox (also known as varicella) is an acute viral illness. It is a common childhood infection that may be prevented by vaccination. It is highly contagious, but rarely serious for most children.

CAUSE Varicella-zoster virus (VZV), a member of the herpesvirus family.

SYMPTOMS Mild fever and generalized skin rash that begins on the chest, back, underarms, neck, and face. It starts out as red bumps and within several hours, the bumps turn into small blisters (fluid-filled bumps), and then scabs after a few days. The sores commonly occur in batches with different stages (bumps, blisters, and sores) present at the same time.

Chickenpox can be severe in newborns, those with weakened immune systems, and susceptible pregnant women (have not had chickenpox in the past or varicella vaccine). Complications that commonly lead to hospitalization include severe skin and soft tissue infections, pneumonia, encephalitis, and dehydration.

SPREAD Spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes tiny droplets with virus into the air and another person breathes them in. Also spread from person to person by touching the blister fluid or secretions from the nose or mouth of a person with chickenpox. Can be spread by contact with the lesions of someone with uncovered shingles (see shingles fact sheet).

INCUBATION It takes from 10 to 21 days, usually 14 to 16 days, after being exposed until symptoms develop.

CONTAGIOUS PERIOD From 1 to 2 days before the rash begins and until all blisters have become scabs (generally within 5 days, but with a range of 4 to 7 days after the appearance of the first blisters in an otherwise healthy child). Persons who have progressive varicella (development of new lesions greater than 7 days) might be contagious longer.

DIAGNOSIS Based on typical symptoms and the characteristic rash. Occasionally lab tests are done to confirm chickenpox.

TREATMENT Recommend parents/guardians call their health care provider.

Do not give aspirin or other salicylate-containing medications to any child or adolescent under 18 years of age.

EXCLUSION Childcare and School: Until all blisters have dried into scabs; usually by day 6 after the rash began.

Chickenpox can occur even if someone has had the varicella vaccine. These are referred to as breakthrough infections. They develop more than 42 days after vaccination, are usually less severe, have an atypical presentation (low or no fever, less than 50 skin lesions), and are shorter in duration (4 to 6 days). Bumps, rather

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than blisters, may develop; therefore, scabs may not present. **Breakthrough cases should be considered infectious.** These cases should be excluded until all sores (bumps/blisters/scabs) have faded or no new sores have occurred within a 24-hour period, whichever is later. Sores do not need to be completely resolved before the individual is allowed to return to school.

Exposed children without symptoms do not need to stay home unless chickenpox develops.

PREVENTION/CONTROL

- Minnesota state law requires two doses of varicella vaccine by kindergarten and 7th grade, unless the parent/guardian provides documentation of exemption or medical contraindication.
- If you think a child has chickenpox, have the parent/guardian call their health care provider before taking the child in.
- Cover nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing or cough/sneeze into your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues in the trash.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after contact with secretions from the nose, mouth, or blister fluid. **Thorough handwashing is the best way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.**
- Clean and disinfect objects and surfaces contaminated with secretions from the nose, mouth, or blister fluid at least daily and when soiled (see Section 2).
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects, and surfaces at least daily and when soiled (see Section 2).
- Susceptible persons (those who have not had chickenpox disease or varicella vaccine in the past) who have been exposed to someone with chickenpox should call their health care provider immediately. This is especially important for pregnant women and persons with a weakened immune system. A health care provider may recommend post-exposure prophylaxis based on the timeframe for exposure and other factors.

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

