

Varicella (Chickenpox) - What You Need to Know

What is chickenpox and how does it spread?

Varicella, or chickenpox, is caused by the varicella zoster virus and is characterized by the itchy, often blistering rash that accompanies infection. The rash begins in the upper areas of the body like the chest, back, or face. It can then spread to the rest of the body, including inside the mouth, eyelids, and genital area. Other symptoms include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, and headache.

Chickenpox is spread by contact with an infected person through their coughs or sneezes, or through contact with fluid from a chickenpox blister. A person is contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears and until all blisters have scabbed over. Most infections last from 4 to 7 days. Children generally miss between 5 and 6 days of school from chickenpox. If not immune, up to 90% of people who come into contact with an infected person will also become infected.

The same virus that causes chickenpox also causes shingles.

- After a chickenpox infection, the virus remains dormant and can reactivate later in life resulting in shingles.
- Shingles causes a painful, itchy rash and can lead to serious complications like nerve pain and vision loss.
- People who have never had chickenpox or who do not have immunity to chickenpox through vaccination can get chickenpox from a person infected with shingles.
- You cannot get shingles from a person infected with shingles.

What are complications from chickenpox infection?

Some consider chickenpox a childhood disease or rite of passage, but chickenpox infection can be serious. This is especially true for pregnant people, infants under 12 months, adolescents, adults, and people with weakened immune systems. However, even healthy people can become severely ill from chickenpox.

Complications can include:

- Brain infection or swelling
- Bleeding problems
- Dehydration
- Bacterial infection
- Pneumonia

Though it's rare, serious chickenpox cases can result in hospitalization or even death.

Flip over to read about chickenpox prevention.



Chickenpox is best prevented with vaccination.

- There's no way to tell who will get seriously ill from chickenpox, but we can help prevent it through vaccination.
- The chickenpox vaccine is as a two-dose series recommended for children, adolescents, and adults.
- Children should get their first dose at 12 - 15 months and a second dose at 4 - 6 years.
- Everyone 13 years and older without chickenpox immunity should get 2 doses of the vaccine 4 - 8 weeks apart.

Can I still get chickenpox (or shingles) even if I am vaccinated?

- Breakthrough infections in people vaccinated against chickenpox are rare, however, some vaccinated people can still get chickenpox.
- Infections after vaccination are generally milder and shorter than without vaccination.
- While people vaccinated against chickenpox have a much lower chance of developing shingles later in life, there is a small chance they could still get it.
- Everyone 50 and older should receive a shingles vaccine.

What else do I need to know?

- Colorado law requires school-aged children to receive their second dose of the chickenpox vaccine prior to kindergarten entry.
- Some people should not get the chickenpox vaccine or may need further guidance from a healthcare provider. These include:
 - People who have HIV/AIDS
 - People being treated with drugs that affect the immune system
 - Cancer patients and people receiving radiation therapy
 - People who recently received a blood transfusion or who received blood products
 - People who are or who may be pregnant

Questions? Talk to your healthcare provider, pharmacist, or community health center.

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Sources

- <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/about/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/signs-symptoms/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/shingles/about/index.html>