

Chickenpox (Varicella)

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Chickenpox is a highly communicable disease caused by the varicella virus, a member of the herpes virus family. It is the most commonly reported childhood disease. Initial symptoms include sudden onset of slight fever and lethargy. These are soon followed by an itchy blister-like rash. Symptoms commonly appear 13-17 days after exposure with a range of 11-21 days. The blisters eventually dry, crust over and form scabs. The blisters tend to be more common on covered than exposed parts of the body. They may appear on the scalp, armpits, trunk and even on the eyelids and in the mouth. Mild or inapparent infections occasionally occur in children. The disease is usually more serious in adults than in children. Reye's syndrome has been a potentially serious complication associated with clinical chickenpox occurring almost exclusively in children who take aspirin during the illness. Newborn children (less than one month old) whose mothers are not immune, and patients with leukemia may suffer severe, prolonged or fatal chickenpox. Immunodeficient patients and those on immunosuppressive drugs may have an increased risk of developing a severe form of shingles.

Almost everyone gets chickenpox. In metropolitan communities, about 75 percent of the population have had chickenpox by age 15 and at least 90 percent by young adulthood. In temperate climates, chickenpox occurs most frequently in winter and early spring. Chickenpox is transmitted to others by direct person-to-person contact, by droplet or airborne spread of discharges from an infected person's nose and throat or indirectly through articles frequently soiled by discharges from the infected person's lesions. The scabs themselves are not considered infectious. A person is able to transmit chickenpox from five days before onset of rash to not more than six days after the appearance of the first lesion. Contagion may be prolonged in people with altered immunity conditions.

Chickenpox generally results in lifelong immunity. However, this infection may remain hidden and recur years later as herpes zoster (shingles) in a proportion of older adults and sometimes children. To protect high-risk newborns and immunodeficient patients from exposure, a shot of varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG) is effective in modifying or preventing disease if given within 96 hours after exposure to a case of chickenpox.

The most effective measures to prevent chickenpox are immunization and limited exposure of others who are susceptible particularly susceptible newborns and immunodeficient patients. If symptoms develop the infected person should remain home approximately one week after the skin eruption began or until lesions become dry. Routine administration of varicella vaccine is recommended for children 12-18 months of age with catch-up vaccination for all children 19 months through 12 years of age. The vaccine is also recommended for those susceptible people over the age of 13 who are at increased risk of exposure or have close contact with susceptible persons who are at increased risk of complications from the disease.

Although Chickenpox and Varicella disease is not reportable in Florida the Department of Health began ~~is~~ investigating all varicella-related deaths effective January 1, 1998.

There were six varicella-related deaths in 19987. None of the persons had been immunized against varicella disease. The ages were 6, 8, 21, 29, 45, 58.