

Minnesota Department of Health

Chickenpox (Varicella) and School-Age Children: What Parents Need to Know

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also called varicella, is an itchy rash illness caused by a virus.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Rash is often the first sign of disease in children. Adults may have fatigue and fever one to two days before the rash. The rash appears as red-raised spots that turn into itchy, fluid-filled blisters. Fluid may drain from the blisters before they dry and crust.

Vaccines are not 100 % effective; chickenpox can occur in vaccinated persons. These persons usually have mild symptoms for a shorter amount of time, with fewer than 50 spots (that rarely contain fluid), and low or no fever.

Isn't chickenpox a mild disease?

Most healthy children and adults recover from chickenpox without additional health problems. However the disease can be severe and cause serious complications, even in otherwise healthy individuals. Before vaccine was available, 11,000 people were hospitalized nationally each year.

Possible complications of chickenpox include:

- Infections of the skin and soft tissue
- Dehydration
- Pneumonia
- Encephalitis (inflammation of the brain)
- Fetal complications

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads easily from person to person by direct contact with fluid from the blisters or through the air when someone with chickenpox coughs or sneezes.

When and for how long is a person infectious with chickenpox?

- A person is infectious from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears until all blisters have formed scabs. This usually takes until 4 to 7 days after the rash starts.
- Vaccinated individuals who develop chickenpox are also considered infectious. These cases can spread the virus until all spots have faded or no new spots have developed within a 24-hour period, whichever is later.

If a person is exposed to chickenpox, when might a rash appear?

The time period between exposure and the onset of illness is usually about 2 weeks, but can range from 10 to 21 days.

How long should someone with chickenpox stay home from school or work?

Individuals with chickenpox need to stay home until the rash blisters are dried and crusted. This is usually 4-7 days (typically 6 days) after the rash began.

Vaccinated individuals who develop chickenpox may not have fluid-filled blisters that dry and crust. In this situation, the individual should stay home until all spots have faded or no new spots have developed within a 24-hour period, whichever is later.

What about chickenpox vaccine?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent the spread of chickenpox. Two doses of chickenpox vaccine are required for kindergarten and 7th grade beginning in the fall of 2009 (unless the parent/guardian provides documentation of exemption or medical contraindication).

Chickenpox vaccine is recommended for all young children and for any adolescent and adult who has never had chickenpox disease nor been vaccinated.

- Children should get their first dose at age 12 through 15 months and the second dose at age 4 to 6 years.
- Children up to age 13 years should receive a total of two doses given at least 3 months apart.
- Adolescents age 13 years and older and adults who have never had chickenpox and have never been vaccinated should get two doses, 4 to 8 weeks apart.

During a chickenpox outbreak, MDH will recommend vaccination for individuals who have not received two doses of varicella vaccine and who have no documented history of varicella disease. MDH may also recommend school exclusion of susceptible individuals in certain situations.



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