



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# Chickenpox

**Chickenpox is a virus infection that causes a blistering and very itchy skin rash. Complications involving other parts of the body, although rare, can develop and can be serious. Chickenpox is usually a childhood illness, but it can occur in adults. A vaccine is available to prevent chickenpox.**

## Cause

Chickenpox is caused by a herpes virus called *varicella zoster*.

It is spread by droplets breathed out into the air (e.g., coughing or sneezing) or by the fluid of chickenpox blisters and it is very contagious.

## Signs and symptoms

- Begin between one and three weeks after person is infected.
- Chickenpox may start with a headache, runny nose, mild fever, cough and general unwell feeling. Most younger children do not get these early symptoms.
- A rash develops a day or two after first symptoms: small, red spots appear that quickly become very itchy blisters. The blisters usually last 3 to 4 days then dry out to form crusts (scabs).
- Rash usually starts on the back and chest then spreads. New spots can continue to appear for up to five days.
- The number of blisters can vary from a few on the trunk, to covering the whole body. They can



occur anywhere, including the scalp, eyelids, mouth, throat, anus and vagina.

- The various stages of spots, blistering and crusts may be present on different parts of the body as the rash progresses.
- Blisters can become infected by bacteria and can leave scars.
- Complications include pneumonia, brain infection, skin infection and a bleeding tendency. Infections in the first half of pregnancy can damage the foetus and infections late in pregnancy can cause severe illness in the newborn child.

Symptoms are usually more severe for adults and people with a weakened immune system.

## Important

Most people recover from chickenpox without any problems. However, consult a doctor if:

- Blisters get red and sore with pus
- High fever, severe headaches or vomiting develop
- Joint pain develops
- You also have a condition or are taking medicine that weakens your immune system (e.g., chemotherapy, radiotherapy, HIV).

## How contagious is chickenpox?

- A person with chickenpox is contagious from 2 days before the rash appears until all the blisters have crusted.
- People with chickenpox should not go to child care, school or work until at least five days after the rash first appears AND all the blisters have crusted.
- Someone who has had chickenpox has usually developed immunity to it and so will not catch it again.

- After chickenpox, some of the virus lies dormant in nerve cells in the body. This virus can reactivate later to cause shingles (also known as herpes zoster).
- Someone who has not had chickenpox, or been immunised against it, can catch chickenpox from a person with shingles.

## Preventing chickenpox

Chickenpox vaccine can protect against both chickenpox and shingles.

### Children

The NHMRC recommends at least one dose of chickenpox vaccine (also known as varicella vaccine or VZV) be given to children aged 12 months to 13 years.

- The Australian National Immunisation Program provides one dose of chickenpox vaccine free of charge to all children at 12-18 months of age.
- The National Immunisation Program provides a free 'catch-up' vaccination for children at an age between 10 and 13 years who have not been vaccinated and who have not had chickenpox – the specific age group eligible for free 'catch-up' vaccination varies between states and territories of Australia.
- The NIP free vaccine is available from local doctors and immunisation clinics.
- Children aged between 18 months and 10 years are not eligible for free vaccine, but can arrange vaccination with their doctor.

A second dose of vaccine can give increased protection, but is not provided free of charge by the National Immunisation Program. It can be arranged privately with a doctor.

### People over 14 years of age

The NHMRC recommends two doses of chickenpox vaccine be given to non-immune people over 14 years of age; especially child care workers, teachers, health care workers, parents of young children, household contacts of persons with a weakened immune system and women prior to pregnancy. Ask a doctor.

## Treatment

Treatment for chickenpox aims to relieve itching, fever and discomfort and includes:

- Cold compresses
- Cool baths with a soothing oil, sodium bicarbonate or oatmeal added to the water

- Hydrogel wound dressings to relieve itch and minimise scab and scar formation (e.g., *Solugel*, *Solosite*)
- Soothing mouthwashes for blisters in mouth and throat
- Creams and lotions to reduce itch (e.g., calamine lotion)
- Antihistamine tablets and syrups to reduce itch
- Paracetamol tablets and syrups to reduce fever and pain (do not use aspirin).

Ask a pharmacist for advice.

Antiviral medicine may be prescribed by a doctor for people with complicated illness or a weakened immune system.

## Self care

- Rest as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of fluid, even if blisters in the mouth and throat make swallowing difficult.
- Resist scratching and keep nails clean and short, to reduce risk of infection. The itch may be relieved by gently patting the lesions.
- Pay attention to good personal hygiene (e.g., cover mouth if coughing or sneezing, wash hands often, do not share food or eating utensils).
- While contagious, avoid contact with people who have not had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine, especially pregnant women.

## Related fact cards

- *Childhood Immunisation*
- *Shingles*

## For more information

**HEALTHInsite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Immunise Australia Program** – phone 1800 671 811 or website [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist