



Factsheet: Chickenpox (Varicella)

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox (Varicella) is an acute and highly infectious viral disease. It is most common in children under 10 years in whom it is usually mild. It tends to be more serious in adults, particularly pregnant women, but also in very young babies and in those whose immunity is impaired.

What are the signs of Chickenpox?

For most people chickenpox infection is a mild uncomplicated illness, in fact, many younger people have the infection and have no symptoms at all.

Where patients develop symptoms, the illness has a sudden onset with fever, runny nose, cough and generalised rash. The rash starts with fluid-containing blisters (vesicles) that then scab over. Several crops of these vesicles occur so that at any one time there will be scabs on the body at different stages of development. The rash tends to be more noticeable on the trunk than on exposed parts of the body. The vesicles may also be seen in the mouth and on the scalp.

How long is it infectious?

The incubation period (time from becoming infected to when symptoms first appear) is between two to three weeks. The virus is present at the back of the nose and throat in the first few days and in the fluid of the blisters before they dry up. A person with chickenpox is infectious from 1-2 days before the rash appears until about 5 days after the rash develops and the blisters are dry and crusted.

How is Chickenpox spread?

The chickenpox virus is highly infectious and is spread in droplets from the nose, throat and the rash blisters before they scab over. Droplets from the nose or throat can spread through the air when an infectious person coughs or sneezes and it can also be spread through contact with infected articles such as clothing and bedding freshly soiled by discharge from the vesicles. Treatment is normally aimed at relief of symptoms, however, there is specific treatment available (anti-viral drug therapy) where the circumstances indicate the need for this.

How is Chickenpox related to Shingles?

Both diseases are caused by the same virus. You must have had chickenpox at some time in the past if you have shingles. Following chickenpox infection, the virus can lay dormant (inactive) in the body for several years but may reappear following reactivation of the virus as shingles. It is not known what causes the virus to reactivate but reactivation is usually associated with conditions that depress the immune system such as old age, immunosuppressive therapy and some infections.

Commonly asked questions

If you haven't had chickenpox can you catch it from someone with shingles?

If you haven't had chickenpox and you come into close contact with the fluid from shingles blisters you may develop chickenpox. See key points below.

If you have had chickenpox can you catch shingles from someone with chickenpox?

No, you cannot catch shingles from a person who has chickenpox. Shingles is not spread through coughing, sneezing or casual contact and cannot be transmitted from one person to another. Shingles is caused by the reactivation of the varicella zoster virus in the body following previous chickenpox infection which could have occurred many years ago.

If you have had chickenpox can you catch shingles from someone with shingles?

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Key Points

90% of adults in the UK are immune to chickenpox; many of these people will have had mild infection and may not even know they have had chickenpox. Pregnant women and those with impaired immunity should contact their GP as soon as possible if they have been in contact with chickenpox or shingles and have no definite history of having had the disease.
