

Chickenpox (Varicella)

Description

Chickenpox is a viral illness. It is the same virus that can cause shingles, which usually occurs later in life.

It appears as a rash and general symptoms of being unwell leading up to appearance of the rash.

How does it spread

Chickenpox is very easy to catch, it's highly contagious. The chickenpox virus spreads through the air by coughing and sneezing and by direct contact with mucus, saliva or liquid from blisters. You can catch the chickenpox virus from touching clothing or other objects that have the blister liquid on them.

Infectious period

A child is infectious one to two days before they get the rash, until all the blisters have scabbed over and are dry. This usually takes five to seven days.

Exclusion period

Exclude children one week from appearance of rash, or until all blisters have formed scabs and are dry (whichever is the longest period of time).

Incubation period (time between being exposed and sickness)

10-21 days after being exposed to a person with chickenpox.

Symptoms

Chickenpox can often start with the following symptoms:

- fever
- headache
- runny nose
- cough
- loss of appetite
- feeling tired.

A rash follows one to two days later. It usually starts on the face and scalp, spreads to the chest, back and tummy and then to the arms and legs. It can also appear inside the ears, on the eyelids, inside the nose and mouth, and even around the genital area. The rash continues to spread and it usually becomes very itchy.

Within a few hours after each spot appears, a blister forms. It may appear full of yellow fluid. After a day or so, the fluid turns cloudy. The blisters release liquid containing the virus, then form crusts or scabs that fall off after one to two weeks. The spots heal at different stages, some faster than others, so your child may have the rash in several different stages at once.

Some children may only get a few spots, and others may have a large numbers of spots.

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Responsibilities of staff

Advise parents and caregivers that chickenpox is currently at the centre. This is especially important for children at high risk of severe disease and pregnant women if they have not had chickenpox.

Responsibilities of parents

Keep a child with chickenpox at home for seven days or until the blisters form scabs and are dry (whichever is the longest period of time).

Links/references

- <https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/chickenpox>
- <https://dermnetnz.org/topics/chickenpox/>
- https://www.healthed.govt.nz/system/files/resource-files/HE1215_Infectious%20diseases%20card.pdf