

Medical guidance notes and information

Chicken pox

What is it?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious viral illness. It usually occurs in childhood, and is caused by the Varicella Zoster virus. This virus can also cause shingles in adults who have previously had chickenpox.

Signs and symptoms

Fever and feeling unwell, followed by a rash. The rash begins with a few small reddish bumps (papules) that quickly fill with fluid to form small blisters (vesicles). These blisters appear in “crops” i.e. small groupings, first on the trunk and then spreading to the arms, legs and face over a period of 2-4 days. Lesions can become infected, usually due to vigorous scratching. The blisters will eventually scab over.

Transmission

Chickenpox is spread from person to person by contact with infected respiratory droplets or by contact with articles freshly soiled by the blister fluid which contains the virus. It is contagious from **2 days before** the onset of the rash, until all the lesions are crusted over (scabbed).

You cannot catch shingles, but you can catch chickenpox from contact with the blister fluid of someone who has shingles if you have never had chickenpox before.

Timescale of infection

The signs and symptoms of infection normally develop between 10 – 21 days after coming into contact with the virus.

Everyone not previously infected or vaccinated is susceptible. After infection, you will not catch chickenpox again. A previous history of chickenpox infection means a person may develop shingles later on in life.

Treatment

General measures to relieve itching associated with skin lesions include cool water soaks or compresses. Some over the counter creams may be useful. Fingernails should be trimmed to prevent scratching, which may lead to a secondary infection. The prescription drug Acyclovir may be recommended by a doctor, but is generally used only in those at high risk for serious complications.

The outcome is generally excellent in uncomplicated cases. Pneumonia and encephalitis (brain inflammation) are serious but rare complications. Pregnant women who have not been vaccinated or previously had chickenpox, should contact their doctor immediately if exposed to someone who has chickenpox.

G1177 A1 10/10/2011

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Employees should stay at home until all of the blisters have scabbed over, and until they feel well enough to return to work. Chickenpox has a tendency to cause more problems in adults than in children and may involve an absence from work for 3-4 weeks.

Issued - April 2003

Revised – September 2010

G1177 A1 10/10/2011

MAYOR OF LONDON