

# Chickenpox

## WHAT IS CHICKENPOX?

- Chickenpox is a viral illness caused by the herpes zoster virus (also known as the Varicella-Zoster virus).
- It is very contagious.
- It commonly occurs in children.
- Over 90 per cent of the population have had chickenpox by the age of 15 years.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Chickenpox is an acute illness that begins with a sudden onset of slight fever, runny nose, feeling generally unwell and a skin rash.
- Sores usually begin as small lumps and turn into blisters and then scabs.
- The sores appear over three to four days, and at any one time, people affected will have sores in various stages of development.

## HOW IS CHICKENPOX SPREAD?

- The virus is spread by coughing (early on in the illness) and by direct contact with skin sores.
- People are infectious from one to two days before the rash appears (that is, during the runny nose phase) and up to five days after (when all the blisters have formed crusts).
- The incubation period of chickenpox is around two weeks.
- People rarely get chickenpox twice.

## HOW CAN I PREVENT CHICKENPOX?

- Pregnant women should avoid contact with someone with chickenpox.
- People with chickenpox should avoid others (and not attend childcare or school) until at least 5 days after onset of the rash and all the blisters have crusted.
- Good personal hygiene should be maintained, such as covering the nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, disposing of soiled tissues, washing hands carefully and not sharing eating utensils, food or drinking cups.
- A vaccine is available for children 12 months and older, but is not on the standard childhood vaccination schedule. One dose is recommended for children younger than 13 years old. The vaccine is recommended for persons 13 years and over who are not immune. This includes 2 doses, 1 to 2 months apart. It is especially recommended for non immune people at high risk, for example, health care workers, persons living with or working with small children,

women planning a pregnancy, and household contacts of persons who are immuno-suppressed.

- People with a history of chickenpox are very likely to be immune. Even adults with no history of chickenpox have a good chance of being immune (because of past mild infection), so for these people the doctor may wish to do a blood test to see if you need a vaccination.

## WHAT IS SHINGLES?

- Shingles is caused by the reactivation of the virus that causes chickenpox.
- This usually occurs many years after the initial illness.
- Shingles is characterised by the development of painful groups of small skin eruptions.
- Skin eruptions generally occur on an area on one side of the body.
- Symptoms may persist for three to five weeks, but in most cases clear up after two weeks.
- The virus can be spread by direct contact with the skin eruptions of infected people.
- Shingles occurs more commonly among older people.
- Adults with cancer, patients on immunosuppressive drugs and those with compromised immune systems are also more susceptible.

## HOW CAN CHICKENPOX AND SHINGLES BE TREATED?

- See your General Practitioner (GP) for advice on ways to minimise the discomfort associated with the symptoms of herpes zoster infection.

*For more information please contact your local public health unit, community health centre, pharmacist or doctor.*

If you have further questions consult your doctor, or telephone your local Public Health Unit - see under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages phone book.

Public Health Units in NSW

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