



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Chickenpox

(varicella-zoster)

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Before the varicella vaccine came into use in the 1990's, nearly everyone got chickenpox, usually during childhood.

How do you get it?

Chickenpox is spread by direct contact with someone who has chickenpox. The virus can be carried through the air by coughing or sneezing, or by contact with clothes or bedding that have recently been used by a person with chickenpox. Scabs that form later during the illness are not infectious.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

The symptoms of chickenpox include a sudden onset of slight fever, headache, crankiness, and loss of appetite. These symptoms are followed a day or two later by an itchy blister-like rash that usually starts on the chest or back, then spreads to the face and other parts of the body. In severe cases, the blisters can appear on the head, armpits, eyelids, and in the mouth. The blisters do not all appear at the same time, but develop in groups that take several days to form, break, and crust over. Chickenpox is usually more serious when it occurs in adults than in children.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually start about 2 weeks after exposure to the virus, but the onset can range from 11 to 21 days.

For how long is a person contagious?

A person is contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears, until all the rash blisters have dried and crusted over.

Should a person with chickenpox stay home from school or work?

Yes. Persons with chickenpox should stay away from school or work for at least 5 days after the appearance of the first crop of blisters or until all the blisters have dried and crusted over.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

Usually, there is no need for special treatment for chickenpox. Calamine lotion can be used to help soothe the itchy rash. Additional and stronger medicines for itching can be prescribed by a doctor if needed.

Can chickenpox be prevented?

Yes. The best way to prevent chickenpox is to receive the varicella vaccine. All children between 12 and 18 months of age should have one dose of varicella vaccine. Children and adults who have had chickenpox do not need the vaccine. Children between 19 months and their 13th birthday should be vaccinated with a single dose. Persons 13 and older who have not had chickenpox should get two doses of the vaccine, 4-8 weeks apart. Certain people should not receive the varicella vaccine. Please check with your doctor. Since 2002, the varicella vaccine has been required for school attendance.

For more information, see the CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/varicella/default.htm>