

## CHICKEN POX FACT SHEET

(Varicella Zoster)

### The disease - transmission and symptoms

Chicken pox (varicella) is a highly contagious viral infection. It is spread through direct contact with virus shedding from the characteristic skin lesions, in oral secretions or via airborne spread. Individuals with varicella can spread infection from 1-2 days prior to the onset of the rash, until the last lesion has crusted, approximately six days later.

The time from exposure to the development of symptoms (incubation period) is usually 10-21 days. The symptoms of chicken pox may include the sudden onset of fever and malaise followed 24-36 hours later by a series of lesions (small red bumps) that progress to thin-walled water blisters (resembling drops of dew). These lesions will then crust over. Lesions generally appear in successive crops. The lesions are more abundant on the parts of the body that are usually covered and may also appear on the scalp, in the mouth nose, ears and genitals. **If you have these symptoms, stay home so you don't expose others.** The duration of the illness is variable, but people can generally return to their regular functions seven days after the onset of the rash. In the majority of otherwise healthy individuals, chicken pox resolves without complications.

### Vaccination

*For non-immune individuals who have been exposed to varicella, vaccination may be effective in preventing disease if taken within 3-5 days of exposure. Chicken Pox Vaccine given pre-exposure is also available to decrease the risk of contracting chicken pox. See the reverse side for more information about the chicken pox vaccine.*

### For relief of symptoms

- Antiviral medication such as: Acyclovir can decrease the severity of symptoms if used within 48 hours of the onset of rash.
- Passive immunization with varicella immune globulin may be considered in limited cases such as the immune compromised or the newly pregnant.
- Drink plenty of fluids and get lots of rest.
- For fever, take acetaminophen (Tylenol, Panadol, etc), if not allergic. **Do not use aspirin** or products containing aspirin.
- For relaxing comfort, take cool baths with Aveeno®, or place oatmeal in a small nylon bag or stocking, which when wet, releases a suspension that soothes the skin.
- Calamine lotion may also be helpful to relieve itching and irritation.
- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl®) 25mg, 1 or 2 every 4-6 hours, can help the itching but can cause drowsiness which may hamper performance; available without a prescription.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.

### Complications

- **Severe complications are not common but in some adults chicken pox may result in serious illness.**
- Bacteria may infect skin lesions. Avoid scratching lesions.
- Lesions in the throat may cause swallowing or breathing difficulties.
- Pneumonia or encephalitis may be a complication in severe cases.
- Persistent symptoms, such as fever, joint pain, abdominal pain, head or neck ache should be reported to your clinician.
- Immunocompromised individuals should contact their health care provider as soon as they know they're been exposed to chickenpox.
- Pregnant women in the first two trimesters of pregnancy who have not had chicken pox may be at increased risk for more serious illness. There is a small risk the virus may affect the developing fetus. **Call your prenatal clinician if you are pregnant and think you have been exposed to chickenpox.**

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For an appointment [www.uhs.berkeley.edu](http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu) or call 510-642-2000

Clinic Nurse 510-643-7197 for advice

