

# Fact Sheet

## Chickenpox



### Description

Chickenpox is a viral illness. The chickenpox virus is also called varicella virus or varicella zoster virus. It is the same virus that can cause shingles. Chickenpox usually starts with one spot, but more spots quickly appear, with fever, headache, runny nose, a cough and feeling very tired. The rash starts on the chest and back, and spreads to the face, scalp, arms and legs. The rash can develop all over the body, inside the ears, on the eyelids, inside the nose and within the vagina, everywhere. The rash continues to spread for three or four days. It is usually 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. These spots are easily broken and form a scab. The spots heal at different stages, some faster than others, so your child may have the rash in several different stages at once. Some kids breeze through chickenpox with just a few spots. Others have a terrible time with hundreds of itchy spots. In families with several children, the illness can last for several weeks within the family if subsequent family members become infected because of the relatively long incubation period.

### Incubation period

A parent often doesn't know that their child has been exposed to chickenpox. Some susceptible children can come into contact with chickenpox and yet not show signs of having caught it. But the general rule is that chickenpox will show up about 10 to 21 days after your child has

come into contact with an infectious person if he or she is susceptible to infection with the chicken pox virus. A child is susceptible to chicken pox either because he/she never been vaccinated or has never had chicken pox.

### Infectious period

Chickenpox is a highly contagious, common childhood disease. A child is infectious from two days before the rash appears and stays infectious until all the blisters form scabs and are dry. Generally, this takes 7 days. Children must stay away from daycare or school while they are infectious. The virus is easily spread when an infected person sneezes or coughs. You can catch chickenpox from clothing that has fresh discharge from the rash of an infected person. Once all the spots have formed scabs, the person is no longer infectious. Your child may go back to school seven days after the first spots appear, as long as the spots are all scabbed over and dry.

Chickenpox is most common in children between the ages of 2 years and 10 years. If one child in your household gets it, it is almost certain that any others who have never had chickenpox will get it next. Some children catch chicken pox but do not develop a rash.

### Treatment

- Most children do not need any treatment for chickenpox.
- For fever or pain, give your child Paracetamol. **Never give your child aspirin, which can be dangerous for children with chickenpox.**

# Fact Sheet

## Chickenpox



- Chickenpox can be prevented by immunisation.

### Preventing scarring

Secondary bacterial infection of the spots can be caused by your child scratching, which can lead to scars.

To help prevent scarring from the spots:

- Dress your child in lightweight pyjamas or clothing
- Clip your child's fingernails as closely as you can
- Try putting mittens on the hands of very young children
- Try 20-minute baths, three times a day, with baking soda or an oatmeal type bath product in lukewarm water
- Change your child's clothes and bed sheets daily
- Apply a soothing lotion such as calamine lotion
- If your child is fidgety and wants to scratch the spots, your doctor may suggest an anti-itch medicine.

### Remember

- Most cases of chickenpox are mild and children get better completely.
- Scarring can happen if your child scratches the spots and they get infected.
- For fever or pain, give your child paracetamol, not aspirin (make sure the dose of medication is recommended by your child's doctor or pharmacist).
- Your child needs to see a doctor if the child has a very high fever or is very ill, particularly if they become very drowsy, or are breathing fast or vomiting a lot.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.  
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional  
to make sure this information is right for your child.

*This document was reviewed on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2010.*

the  
children's  
hospital at Westmead

[www.chw.edu.au](http://www.chw.edu.au)

 **SYDNEY  
CHILDREN'S  
HOSPITAL  
RANDWICK**

[www.sch.edu.au](http://www.sch.edu.au)

  
Kaleidoscope  
HUNTER CHILDREN'S HEALTH NETWORK

[www.kaleidoscope.org.au](http://www.kaleidoscope.org.au)