

CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA)
Reportable Disease (only hospitalizations and deaths)

Chickenpox (also known as varicella) is an acute viral illness. It is a common childhood infection that may be prevented by vaccination. It is highly contagious, but rarely serious for most children.

CAUSE

Varicella-zoster virus (VZV), a member of the *Herpesvirus* family

SYMPTOMS

The classic symptom of chickenpox is a rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters that eventually turn into scabs. The rash may first show up on the face, chest, and back then spread to the rest of the body, including inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area. It usually takes about one week for all the blisters to become scabs.

Other typical symptoms that may begin to appear 1-2 days before rash include:

- high fever
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- headache

Chickenpox can be severe in newborns and those with weakened immune systems. It rarely occurs in adults, however, when it occurs it may be more severe. Complications that commonly lead to hospitalization and can lead to death include severe skin and soft tissue infections, pneumonia, and encephalitis.

Mild, atypical chickenpox, known as breakthrough varicella, is characterized by no fever, less than 50 lesions, and atypical lesions that don't progress to vesicles. Breakthrough varicella occurs in vaccinated individuals at least 42 days after vaccination, and is usually shorter than classic chickenpox.

SPREAD

Person-to-person by direct contact with blister fluid or airborne spread of aerosolized blister secretions and respiratory secretions. Indirect spread is possible through articles recently soiled by infected respiratory secretions or blister fluid.

INCUBATION (time from exposure to onset of symptoms)

10 to 21 days, usually 14 to 16 days

CONTAGIOUS PERIOD

As long as 5 days before the rash begins, but usually 1 to 2, until all lesions are crusty/scabbed (usually 5 days after their appearance). Immunocompromised individuals may have a longer period of communicability.

DIAGNOSIS

Usually based on observing symptoms including the characteristic rash.

TREATMENT

Recommend parents/guardians call their healthcare provider.

DO NOT GIVE ASPIRIN or OTHER SALICYLATE-CONTAINING MEDICATIONS TO ANY CHILD OR ADOLESCENT UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE.

EXCLUSION

Child care and School: Until all the blisters have scabbed (usually 5 days after their appearance), regardless of vaccination status. Breakthrough varicella in vaccinated children is contagious. The incubation period for chickenpox is 10 to 21 days; it is possible that a child could be incubating (infected with varicella virus, but not yet showing symptoms) when they receive the varicella vaccine. Exclude a child with chickenpox symptoms until the blisters have scabbed regardless of whether or not they have received varicella vaccine.

PREVENTION/CONTROL

- All children should be **vaccinated** with two doses of varicella vaccine; the first dose is at age 12-15 months and the second dose is typically at 4-6 years of age.
- If you think a child has chickenpox, have the parent/guardian call their healthcare provider before taking the child in.
- Cover nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing or cough/sneeze into your elbow. Dispose of used tissues.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after contact with secretions from the nose or mouth or blister fluid.
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects, and surfaces and clean and disinfect objects and surfaces contaminated with secretions from the nose or mouth and/or blister fluid at least daily, and when soiled.
- Susceptible persons (did not receive varicella vaccine) who have been exposed to someone with chickenpox should call their healthcare provider immediately. This is especially important for pregnant women and persons with a weakened immune system.

For more information please contact Contra Costa Public Health at 925-313-6740 and visit our website at <http://cchealth.org/topics/chickenpox/>