



NL Health Services

Infection Prevention and Control

FACT SHEET

Chickenpox (Varicella Zoster)

**HAND HYGIENE:
THE BEST
WAY TO PREVENT
INFECTION**

What are chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), a highly contagious virus.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

- Symptoms appear 10-21 days following contact with chickenpox and can last about 2 weeks.
- Fever, which may be followed by headache, runny nose, and tiredness.
- After a few days, an itchy rash appears usually on the face, scalp, and trunk of the body.
- The spots will appear to blister. The clear fluid within the blisters contains the virus.
- Once the blisters have dried and crusted, you are no longer contagious.

Who is at risk?

- Anyone who has never had chickenpox may get chickenpox.
- If you have never had chickenpox, you can develop chickenpox if you come in direct contact with an individual who has shingles, as it is caused by the same virus.
- Some vaccinated individuals may still get chickenpox, but they usually have a very mild case.

How are chickenpox spread?

- The virus is spread in the air by an infected individual coughing or sneezing or by contact with the fluid from the chickenpox blisters or in the saliva of an infected individual.
- An individual with chickenpox can spread the virus for up to 1-2 days before the rash appears and until the blisters have crusted.
- Pregnant women with chickenpox can pass the virus onto their baby before birth.

Do chickenpox cause complications?

In most cases, chickenpox is a mild virus. Newborns and individuals with weakened immune systems are at risk for more serious complications. These complications can include:

- Pneumonia
- Encephalitis (inflammation of the brain)
- Reye Syndrome
- Bacterial skin infections

What can I do if I have chickenpox?

- Ointments and oral medications are available to reduce symptom severity and duration of the infection.
- Avoid contact with newborns, children less than 1 year old, and individuals with weakened immune systems until you are no longer infectious.
- Wear loose clothing. Natural fibers (i.e., cotton) are better than artificial fibers.
- Take cool baths and avoid perfumed soaps.
- Keep the rash clean and dry.
- Rest, drink fluids, and eat well.
- Do not touch or scratch the rash. This can cause infection, delay healing, and leave scars.
- Wash your hands after touching the blisters.