

CHICKEN POX

Chicken pox, varicella in medical terminology, is an extremely common infectious disease of childhood. The virus that causes this infection is highly contagious, which explains why school age children almost always contract the disease at some point in their early school attendance. The infection is then brought home to be shared with younger brothers and sisters. The infection rate among household contacts that have never had this infection is 85%. Chicken pox occurs only in humans and is not carried by animals.

Fortunately, most children who are infected with this virus have a mild course to their illness. The time from exposure to the virus and actual infection with it, to the appearance of the rash (the incubation period) is 10 - 20 days. Fourteen days after exposure is the most common time to break out in the rash. A child who has been infected is contagious to others for 1 - 2 days before the appearance of the rash. This is what makes it so difficult to protect classmates in school.

The first signs of illness, before the rash, are minimal and can consist of a runny nose and tiredness. The rash first appears on the scalp and trunk and consists of pink papules (small raised bumps). The papules rapidly become vesicles (small blisters) within a few hours and new papules and vesicles continue to develop over the next 3 - 5 days. One description of the classic lesion of chicken pox is "a dew drop on a rose petal", denoting the clear blister on a pink base. The vesicles spread from the trunk to the face and the arms and legs. Sometimes, small ulcers appear in the mouth. The fluid in the vesicles initially appears clear, but it rapidly becomes cloudy. The vesicles break, the fluid dries and then scabs form over the sites. The numbers of vesicles can range from 200 to 400. The rash is usually very itchy and is associated with a low fever.

Once all of the vesicles have scabbed over, generally by 6 days after the appearance of the rash, the child is no longer contagious and may return to school. The scabs may last for another week and then small white scars may remain. Most of these will clear over the next year.

The treatment of chicken pox is supportive, giving paracetamol for fever and antihistamine medicines or Calamine lotion for the itchy rash. Aspirin should be avoided. If the itching is severe, soaks in oatmeal baths may be helpful in relieving the itch. It is important to keep the skin clean since bacterial infections of the skin may develop in the open sores. Bathing is permitted during chicken pox - in fact, it's probably a good idea. If chicken pox lesions become tender or enlarged, they may have become infected and should be seen by your doctor. Bacterial infections of the skin are the most common complication during chicken pox.

There is a medicine available to specifically treat chicken pox. This medicine, called Acyclovir, if started early in the illness, can reduce the severity and shorten the duration of the illness. This medicine is not recommended for routine use in chicken pox. It may be useful in children who are at significantly increased risk of complications from chicken pox.

Children with Ectodermal Dysplasia are not at an unusual risk for chicken pox. They tolerate the infection as well as other children, although precautions must be taken to avoid high temperatures if they cannot sweat. There are some children who are at risk for complications with this virus and they may need special treatment, such as an injection of immune globulin within 96 hours of exposure to the virus. The children at risk include those with immune deficiencies (who cannot fight infections), those on drugs which alter their immune systems (such as cancer drugs or steroids), children who have had organ transplants and small, very premature infants.

Fortunately, once you have had chicken pox, you are protected for life. Some people, however, will develop herpes zoster, also known as shingles (localized groups of vesicles) sometime later in life. The virus that causes shingles is the same as the chicken pox virus. This disorder is relatively uncommon considering that almost everyone gets the chicken pox. There is no way of knowing who will develop shingles sometime later in life and no way to prevent the rash. Chicken pox is one of the most common viral rashes of childhood. Although the illness may be annoying, it rarely causes major health problems.

Reproduced and updated with the kind permission of the National Foundation for Ectodermal Dysplasias

Supporting a normal lifestyle

Ectodermal Dysplasia Society (Registered Charity No. 1089135). Disclaimer: Any views or opinions are made by the author in good faith. No liability whatsoever is accepted by the author or the Ectodermal Dysplasia Society. Recipients should make their own additional enquiries of medical and other relevant authorities before acting on these views. The use of a product name does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by the author or the Society.