

Chickenpox

Patient Information Leaflet

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a viral infection caused by a herpes virus (varicella-zoster virus VZV). It mainly affects children and causes a characteristic rash.

Clinical features

Chicken pox often starts with a fever, headache and muscle pain before the rash appears. Common features of chicken pox are:

- Very itchy rash usually starting on the trunk which spreads to the rest of the body, although hands and feet tend to be unaffected.
- Rash starts as small spots which become fluid filled blisters and eventually dry to form crusts.

People at special risk

Chickenpox is usually a mild and very common infection but it can be harmful to certain groups of people. If the following groups of people come into contact with someone who has chickenpox then they should contact their GP for advice:

- Pregnant women
- People with weakened immune systems
- People with blood disorders
- Very young babies (under 4 weeks old)

Pregnancy

Rarely, chickenpox during pregnancy can cause complications both for the woman and her baby. If you have already had chickenpox in the past then it is extremely unlikely that you will get it again.

If you haven't had chickenpox or are unsure then you should see your GP or Midwife immediately if you think you have been in contact with a case, even if you have no rash or symptoms.

Occurrence

Chickenpox mainly occurs in children under 10 years old and by adulthood most people have natural immunity.

How is it spread?

Chickenpox is highly infectious. It is passed from person to person through contact with infected secretions from blisters or respiratory droplets. It may also be passed on from items which have been contaminated with secretions such as bed linen.

Incubation Period

The length of time between a person being in contact with the infection and having symptoms (incubation period) is usually 14-16 days.

Infectious Period

Children with chickenpox can be infectious from 1 to 2 days before the rash starts, until all the blisters have crusted over (usually 5 to 6 days after the start of the rash).

How is it treated?

In most cases no treatment is required and the illness is self limiting. In some rare cases, those in the special risk groups mentioned above may require antivirals or immunoglobulin to reduce the risk of developing a more severe form of the virus.

Prevention

Those in the special risk groups should avoid contact with a case of chickenpox.

Exclusion

Children who have chickenpox should stay off school or nursery until vesicles become dry (approx. 7 days) or for a minimum of 5 days after rash onset.

As always, thorough hand washing, paying particular attention to between fingers and under the nails, is extremely important.

Remember to wash hands:

After

- Changing nappies
- Using and cleaning the toilet
- Helping young children with toileting
- Contact with respiratory secretions, e.g. nose blowing.

Before

- Handling food
- Cooking
- Feeding youngsters or the elderly
- Eating.

Further information on Chickenpox can be obtained by contacting the NHS Lothian Health Protection Team on 0300 790 6264.

Online by visiting NHS Inform at

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/chickenpox>

or by visiting Health protection Scotland at

<https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/a-to-z-of-topics/chickenpox/>