

Fact Sheet

April 2012

Chickenpox - Information for Teachers and Support Staff

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common illness caused by the *varicella zoster* virus. While chickenpox is most common in childhood, adults who get chickenpox are at higher risk for more severe disease and complications than children. In adulthood, the virus can reactivate to cause a painful rash called shingles.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox usually begins with a fever, cough, sore throat and general aches and pains. About two days later, itchy red spots appear on the skin and become small fluid-filled blisters.

How can chickenpox be treated?

For most people, chickenpox will get better on its own. Creams can be used to stop the itching rash. Sometimes antiviral medications can be given to treat severe infections.

How can someone get chickenpox?

Chickenpox spreads through the air from coughing and sneezing or by directly touching the rash (blisters). Chickenpox is most contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash appears. It is contagious until all the blisters have scabbed over, usually in 5 days.

Who is at risk of getting chickenpox?

Anyone who has never had chickenpox or the vaccine is at risk. People who grew up in tropical countries have a higher chance of getting chickenpox as an adult.

What are the complications of chickenpox infection?

Chickenpox blisters can sometimes get infected. In rare cases, chickenpox can cause severe complications such as pneumonia (lung infection), blood infections, severe skin infection (flesh eating disease), encephalitis (brain swelling) and birth defects (in pregnant women). These complications tend to be more severe in adults and those with a weak immune system.

What are the risks of chickenpox for pregnant women?

If a pregnant woman gets chickenpox, there is a small chance that her baby may get chickenpox and could have birth defects. If she gets chickenpox close to the delivery, the newborn baby can get very sick. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox and have been in contact with a person with chickenpox or shingles, you should see a physician immediately.

When can students with chickenpox return to school?

Staying home from school or daycare is not necessary if a child feels well enough. The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that a child with mild chickenpox who is able to participate normally in all activities should be allowed to return to school even if they still have a rash. Once the rash appears, it is usually too late to prevent exposure to classmates and teachers.

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I have been exposed to chickenpox and have never had it before. What can I do?

Stay away from pregnant women, newborns and people with weak immune systems. The chickenpox vaccine can prevent chickenpox or severe infection if it is given within 3 to 5 days of being exposed to a person with chickenpox. People with certain medical conditions who cannot get the vaccine can take anti-viral medications or immunoglobulin, a blood product with antibodies to prevent infection if given within 96 hours from contact with a case of chickenpox.

How do I know if I'm protected against chickenpox?

Children, teenagers or adults who have had chickenpox in the past are protected for life. If you are unsure if you have had chickenpox before, you can ask your doctor for a blood test to check your immunity.

How can I protect myself from getting chickenpox?

If you have never had chickenpox before, you can visit your doctor to get vaccinated. The chickenpox vaccine (Varilrix®, Varivax®III) can prevent 70 to 90% of infections and can reduce the chance of getting very sick.

How many shots of chickenpox vaccine do I need?

Anyone 13 years of age and older who has not had chickenpox requires 2 doses of vaccine given at least 6 weeks apart.

Do I qualify for free vaccine?

Adults with certain medical conditions who are at high risk for severe chickenpox infection can get vaccine for free. Talk to your doctor to see whether you are eligible.

Who should NOT get the chickenpox vaccine?

- Pregnant women (women should not get pregnant for one month after getting the vaccine)
- Those with a weak immune system, check with your doctor
- Those who had a live vaccine (e.g. MMR, yellow fever) in the last 28 days
- Those who had a blood product (blood or plasma transfusion, or serum immunoglobulin) in the last 90 days
- Those with untreated tuberculosis (Varivax®III only)
- Those who had an allergic reaction to a varicella vaccine in the past

What are the side effects of this vaccine?

Redness, soreness and swelling where the needle was given are common. Fever is less common. Rarely, a mild chickenpox-like rash can occur 1 to 2 weeks after vaccination that gets better on its own and should be covered. If the rash cannot be covered, stay away from pregnant women, newborns and people with weak immune systems. Serious allergic reactions are rare and include trouble breathing, a rash or swelling in the throat and face. See a health care provider immediately if a serious reaction occurs.

For more information contact Toronto Health Connection: 416-338-7600, TTY: 416-392-0658.

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Chickenpox (Varicella) Disease and Vaccine Fact Sheet

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common childhood illness caused by varicella zoster virus that usually gets better without medicines. In adulthood, the virus can reactivate causing a painful rash called shingles.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox usually begins with a fever, cough, sore throat and general aches and pains. About 2 days later, itchy red spots appear on the skin and become small fluid-filled blisters.

How can chickenpox be treated?

For most children, chickenpox will get better on its own. Creams can be used to stop the itching rash. If your child has a fever, it is safe to use acetaminophen (Tylenol, Tempra, Panadol). Do not give your child aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) as it can cause a serious illness called Reye Syndrome. Sometimes severe chickenpox is treated with specific medications that act against the virus.

How can someone get chickenpox?

Chickenpox spreads through the air from coughing and sneezing or by directly touching the rash (blisters). Chickenpox is most contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash appears. It is contagious until all the blisters have scabbed over, usually in 5 days.

Who is at risk of getting chickenpox?

Anyone who has never had chickenpox or the vaccine is at risk. People who grew up in tropical countries have a higher chance of getting chickenpox as an adult.

What are the complications that can happen when someone gets chickenpox infection?

Chickenpox blisters can sometimes get infected. In rare cases, chickenpox can cause severe complications such as pneumonia (lung infection), blood infections, severe skin infection (flesh eating disease), encephalitis (brain swelling) and birth defects in pregnant women. These complications tend to be more severe in adults and those with a weak immune system.

What are the risks of chickenpox for pregnant women?

If a pregnant woman gets chickenpox, there is a small chance that her baby may get chickenpox and could have birth defects. If she gets chickenpox close to the delivery, the newborn baby can get very sick. If you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox and have been in contact with a person with chickenpox or shingles, see your doctor immediately.

When can my child with chickenpox return to school?

Staying home from school or daycare is not necessary if a child feels well enough. The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that a child with mild chickenpox who is able to participate normally in all activities should be allowed to return to school even if they still have a rash. Once the rash appears, it is usually too late to prevent exposure to classmates and teachers. Fortunately, a vaccine is available to prevent chickenpox.

I have been exposed to chickenpox and have never had it before, what can I do?

Stay away from pregnant women, newborns and people with weak immune systems. The chickenpox vaccine can prevent chickenpox or severe infection if it is given within 3 to 5 days of being exposed to a person with chickenpox. People with certain medical conditions who cannot get the vaccine can take anti-

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viral medications or immunoglobulin, a blood product with antibodies to prevent infection if given within 10 days from contact with a case of chickenpox.

How can I protect myself or my child from getting chickenpox?

Children, teenagers or adults who have had chickenpox in the past are protected for life. Two doses of vaccine (Varilrix®, VarivaxIII®, Priorix-Tetra®) protect almost everyone and can reduce the chance of getting very sick. Children at least 12 months of age born on or after January 1st, 2000 who have not had chickenpox can receive two doses of vaccine free as part of their routine childhood vaccines. The first dose is given at 15 months and the second before school entry (4 to 6 years of age) as part of Priorix-Tetra® (a vaccine that combines protection against mumps, measles, rubella and chickenpox).

Who else can get the vaccine for free?

People with certain medical conditions who are at high risk for severe chickenpox infection can also get the vaccine. Talk to your doctor to see whether you are eligible.

How many shots of chickenpox vaccine do I need?

Everyone 12 months of age and older who has not had chickenpox should receive two doses of chickenpox vaccine. The two doses of vaccine are free for children at least 12 months of age who are born on or after January 1st, 2000.

Who should not get the chickenpox vaccine?

- Pregnant women (women should not get pregnant for one month after getting the vaccine).
- Those with a weak immune system, check with your doctor.
- Those who had a live vaccine (e.g. MMR, yellow fever) in the last 28 days.
- Those who had a blood product (blood or plasma transfusion, or serum immunoglobulin) in the last 3 to 11 months.
- Those with untreated tuberculosis (Varivax®III only).
- Those who had an allergic reaction to a varicella vaccine in the past.

What are the side effects of this vaccine?

Redness, soreness and swelling where the needle was given are common. Fever is less common and sometimes, a mild chickenpox-like rash can occur 1 to 2 weeks after getting the vaccine. The rash gets better on its own and should be covered. If the rash cannot be covered, stay away from pregnant women, newborns and people with weak immune systems. Serious allergic reactions are rare and include trouble breathing, a rash or swelling in the throat and face. See a health care provider immediately if a serious reaction occurs.

How do I keep track of my immunizations?

Update your personal immunization card (yellow card) and keep it in a safe place! Parents should send information on their children's vaccines to Toronto Public Health's Immunization Information Line at 416-392-1250.