



Southeast Georgia PEDIATRICS

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Varicella (Chickenpox)



General Information

Chickenpox is a common infection of children caused by the varicella-zoster (V-Z) virus and associated with fever and a rash. The rash is composed of small water blisters, each appearing like a dewdrop surrounded by a rose pink halo. They may be located anywhere on the skin, scalp or mucous membranes (mouth, throat, vagina). Chickenpox can occur at any age but is seen most often in children younger than 10 years old.

V-Z virus spreads through the air from the skin rash or throat of the person who is ill. Once the virus is breathed in, illness begins about 2 weeks later (range, 10 to 21 days). Exposed persons who have already had the disease rarely catch it again, although second attacks do occur. These are usually mild and most likely to develop in children who first had chickenpox before they were 1 year old.

Once a person catches chickenpox, s/he carries V-Z virus for life in certain nerve cells. It can reappear in later years as shingles (herpes zoster), a painful blistering rash which occurs in a narrow band on one side of the body. Shingles usually develops in elderly people but occasionally occurs in children.



The Illness

There may be 1 day of feeling ill before the rash breaks out. More commonly the first sign of chickenpox is the appearance of tiny red bumps that look like insect bites. These progress over 24 hours into clear and then cloudy blisters which dry up and form crusts (scabs). There may be anywhere from 20 to more than a 1000 tiny blisters all over the body; the "average" child develops between 250 and 500. Typically the rash itches intensely, causing irritability during the day and restlessness at night.

Most children have a fever, sometimes as high as 104°F (40°C). The more severe the rash, the higher the fever can be expected to be. Mild sore throat and swelling of the lymph nodes (glands) of the neck may occur. Poor appetite is common.

As the last blisters scab over, the fever will fall and your child should begin to feel better. Illness usually lasts from 5 to 7 days.



When To Call Your Doctor

You should call our office if you feel frightened or worried about your child's illness.

We would like you to call our office immediately if your child develops: vomiting for more than 4 hours; extreme sleepiness; difficulty walking; severe cough, shortness of breath or chest pain; severe stomach ache; fever over 104°F (40°C).

Call us during regular office hours (and on weekends) if your child: develops unusual redness, swelling or pain over an area of the rash; has fever for more than 1 week; continues to get new blisters after 7 days.

If we ask you to bring your child to be checked, please have him/her placed directly into an examining room, away from other patients.



Treatment

Relief of itching, the most troubling symptom for your child, is very important. Lukewarm baths containing oatmeal (Aveeno® colloidal) or baking soda (½ cup) are not only soothing but can also be helpful in cleansing the skin and reducing the chances of secondary bacterial infection. Applying calamine lotion to the blisters is sometimes helpful. Fingernails should be trimmed.

Antihistamines taken by mouth, such as Benadryl®, reduce itching and provide the added benefit of helping an irritable and anxious child to sleep.

Acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®, Tempra®, Panadol®, Liquiprin®) can be used for temperature over 101°F (38.3°C). Aspirin should not be given to children with chickenpox since it can lead to brain, liver and kidney disease (Reye syndrome).

Antibiotics are not effective against chickenpox.
 Offer your child a regular diet, but remember that it is not serious if s/he does not eat well for a few days. Encourage extra amounts of favorite juices or soft drinks, particularly if there is a fever.
 Your child may determine his/her own level of activity.



Contagion

Chickenpox is one of the most contagious of all diseases. Persons with chickenpox are infectious for 2 days *before* the rash appears and remain so until all the blisters have dried up. It is therefore impossible to prevent spread in a household. Unfortunately the second child in a family to become ill often has a more severe case of chickenpox than the first, with higher fever and a more extensive rash.

Normal adolescents (over 15 years of age) and adults in your household who have not had chickenpox can prevent or reduce the severity of illness by obtaining an injection of a special antibody called "VZIG" within 96 hours of exposure. This preparation is in short supply and is not given to healthy children. Because most adults have immunity to chickenpox, even those who believe they have not had the disease, it is desirable to obtain a blood test to be certain that giving the VZIG is necessary. Consult your doctor for advice.

Chickenpox can be extremely serious in persons with poor resistance, such as those with cancer, on chemotherapy or receiving steroids (e.g., prednisone). If your child is in any of these categories or if you know of such a person who has been exposed to your child, please discuss this matter with your doctor right away.



Return to Group Activities

Children with chickenpox may return to school or day care when all their blisters have dried up. This is usually about 1 week after onset of the rash. Sometimes one or two blisters persist under the thick skin of the palms or soles; these are no longer infectious as long as the other parts of the rash have scabbed over.



Common Concerns

Don't be afraid to bathe your child, even if there is a severe rash. It won't spread the rash or worsen it and will probably help in preventing bacterial infection of the skin. But be gentle!

Chickenpox lesions on the eye do not require special treatment unless there is a lot of redness and swelling. If you are worried, call our office.

A healthy adult or child who has had chickenpox cannot "carry" the virus and infect someone else.

Light or dark spots may remain after the scabs fall off. They almost always disappear after several months to years.

It is perfectly safe for your child to visit grandma or grandpa. They will not develop shingles as a result of being exposed to chickenpox.



Recheck Appointment

Make an appointment to be seen in _____ days.

Not necessary _____

Other _____



Further Advice from Your Doctor

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