



Central Michigan District Health Department
“Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities”

For more information, call your local CMDHD branch office:

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www.cmdhd.org

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly infectious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus. Symptoms include a blister like-rash, itching, tiredness, and fever. The rash shows up first on the face and trunk (stomach/back), and then covers the entire body causing 250-500 itchy blisters in unvaccinated persons.

How does a person get chickenpox?

Chickenpox is highly contagious and spreads easily from person to person by direct contact or through the air by an infected person’s coughing or sneezing. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before the appearance of the rash and until all of the blisters have formed scabs. Chickenpox symptoms may begin 10-21 days following contact to someone who has chickenpox disease.

Can you get chickenpox even if you have been vaccinated?

Yes. About 20% of people who have been vaccinated with one dose of chickenpox vaccine will get chickenpox if exposed, but the disease is usually milder. Vaccinated persons who get chickenpox usually have less than 50 blisters, which may be more like bug bites than the chicken pox blister. In 2006, the Advisory Council on Immunization Practices recommended two doses of chickenpox vaccine for children. A recent study showed that children who received two doses of chickenpox vaccine were three times less likely to get chickenpox, compared to children who only received one dose of vaccine.

What is chickenpox disease like?

Chickenpox commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5-10 days. Children usually miss 5-6 days of school or childcare due to their illness. One in ten unvaccinated children who get chickenpox will have a complication such as infected skin sores, other infections, dehydration from vomiting or diarrhea, pneumonia, or encephalitis. In vaccinated children the disease is usually milder, resulting in no symptoms except for a few red bumps. Adults, infants, teens, and people whose immune systems have been weakened because of illness or medications such as steroids or chemotherapy are more likely to develop more severe illness. Serious complications include bacterial infections which can involve the skin, tissues under the skin, bone, lungs, joints, and blood. Other serious problems include complications from the varicella zoster virus and include viral pneumonia, bleeding problems, and infection of the brain. Prior to the introduction of vaccination, 10,600 persons were hospitalized and 100 people died as a result of chickenpox in the United States every year.

Can a healthy person die from chickenpox disease?

Yes. From 1990-1994, before vaccination, 50 children and 50 adults died from chickenpox every year; most of them were healthy persons. Since the introduction of vaccine, some deaths continue to occur in healthy, unvaccinated children and adults. Most healthy adults who contracted chickenpox contracted the disease from their healthy, unvaccinated child.

Can chickenpox be prevented?

Yes, vaccination with recommended two-doses of varicella (chickenpox) vaccine prevents chickenpox in most people. Contact your local Central Michigan District Health Department branch office (www.cmdhd.org) for additional vaccination information or to schedule an appointment.