

# KNOW THE FACTS!

## VARICELLA (CHICKENPOX) Fact Sheet

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### ***What is varicella (chickenpox)?***

Chickenpox is an infectious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus that results in a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness and fever. The rash appears first on the trunk and face, but can spread over the entire body causing from 250 to 500 itchy blisters. Most cases of chickenpox occur in persons less than 15 years old. Prior to the use of varicella vaccine, the disease had annual cycles, peaking in the spring of each year.

### ***How do you get chickenpox?***

Chickenpox is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact or through the air from an infected person's coughing or sneezing. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes from 10-21 days after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox.

### ***What is the chickenpox illness like?***

In children, chickenpox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5-10 days. Children usually miss 5 or 6 days of school or childcare due to their chickenpox. About half of all children with chickenpox visit a health care provider due to symptoms of their illness such as high fever, severe itching, an uncomfortable rash, dehydration or headache. In addition, about 1 child in 10 has a complication from chickenpox serious enough to visit a health care provider including infected skin lesions, other infections, dehydration from vomiting or diarrhea, exacerbation of asthma and more serious complications such as pneumonia. Certain groups of persons are more likely to develop more serious illness with complications. These include adults, infants, adolescents and people with weak immune systems from either illnesses or from medications such as long-term steroids.

### ***What are the serious complications from chickenpox?***

Serious complications from chickenpox include bacterial infections which can involve many sites of the body including the skin, tissues under the skin, bone, lungs (pneumonia), joints and the blood. Other serious complications are due directly to the virus infection and include viral pneumonia, bleeding problems and infection of the brain (encephalitis).

### ***How is chickenpox treated?***

Symptomatically. Aspirin should not be used to treat infants, children or teenagers with chickenpox, because of the increased risk for developing Reye syndrome. Oral acyclovir given to children within 24 hours of rash onset results in decreased duration and severity of disease and should be considered for those at risk for severe complications of varicella, such as persons older than 12 years of age, persons with chronic cutaneous or pulmonary disorders, persons receiving long-term salicylate therapy, and persons receiving short, intermittent, or aerosolized courses of corticosteroids.

### ***What can a susceptible person do if they have been exposed to chicken pox?***

Susceptible persons exposed to chicken pox may be vaccinated with varicella vaccine so long as there are no contraindications to vaccination. The vaccine is effective in preventing illness or modifying the severity of illness if used within 3 days, and possibly up to 5 days, after exposure.



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### *How long is isolation required?*

In Ohio the law states that “a person with chickenpox shall be isolated, including exclusion from school or child care center, until the sixth day after onset of rash, or until all lesions are dry, whichever comes first.”



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