

Varicella (Chickenpox)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is varicella?

Varicella, also known as **chickenpox**, is caused by the *varicella zoster* virus. It is a disease that is very easily spread from person to person.

Who gets chickenpox?

Anyone can get chickenpox. Children and young adults and people with weak immune systems are at highest risk for getting chickenpox. Although less than five percent of adults get sick from chickenpox, adults are more likely to die from chickenpox and its complications than children. There are still cases of varicella around the world where populations are not vaccinated against the disease.

How do people get chickenpox?

Chickenpox is easily spread through the air by infected people when they sneeze or cough. It can also be spread from touching an infected person's chickenpox blisters and/or touching items that come in contact with a skin rash or discharge from the chickenpox blisters. People who are not protected against chickenpox can easily get infected just by being in the same room with someone with chickenpox. People are at highest risk for getting chickenpox if they are around a person with chickenpox one to two days before and up to four to five days after the rash appears.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

After contact with a sick person with chickenpox, it usually takes two to three weeks before the symptoms of chickenpox appear. Symptoms of chickenpox come in stages. The first symptoms include:

- Aches
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Grumpiness
- Sore throat

An itchy rash of blisters will develop on the person's skin all over the body. The rash may even spread into the mouth or other areas inside of the body. The rash will begin to show between 10 to 21 days after contact with someone with chickenpox. The rash will dry and begin to scab in four to five days.

What is shingles?

After having chickenpox, the varicella virus stays in the nerve cells of the body. If the varicella virus becomes active again, it can cause shingles. Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is a common illness among older persons (people 50 years of age and older). Shingles can flare up when a person's immune system is weak due to natural aging, cancer, infection, taking certain medications, or disorders present at birth. One important difference between chickenpox and shingles is that you cannot pass shingles from one person to another. There is the rare occurrence that a person who has never had chickenpox (or the chickenpox vaccine) could get chickenpox from a person with shingles.

What are symptoms of shingles?

At first there may be pain, numbness or tingling on one side of the body, usually on the chest or face, two to four days before the rash appears. Afterwards, a painful, blistering rash appears at the rash site. The pain or numbness may last for as long as a year, after the rash is gone.

How are chickenpox and shingles diagnosed?

A health care provider can diagnose chickenpox by observing symptoms and asking for an exposure history. A health care provider can diagnose shingles by observing symptoms as well as taking a medical history.

What is the treatment for chickenpox or shingles?

Most of the time, rest, fluids and good nutrition are all that are needed for treating chickenpox. However, complications of chickenpox will need medical treatment. For people with shingles, there are medications that may be prescribed to control pain and inflammation.

How can chickenpox or shingles be prevented?

Chickenpox and shingles are vaccine preventable diseases. Chickenpox can be prevented by getting the varicella vaccine. It is available in two doses for children and for adults.

Adults 50 years and older are recommended to get two doses of the shingles vaccine called Shingrix (recombinant zoster vaccine) to prevent shingles and the complications from the disease. Adults 19 years and older who have weakened immune systems because of disease or therapy should also get two doses of Shingrix, as they have a higher risk of getting shingles and related complications. Please note, a shingles vaccine called zoster vaccine live (Zostavax) is no longer available for use in the United States, as of November 18, 2020. If you had Zostavax in the past, you should still get Shingrix.

Where can I get more information on chickenpox?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.