

Varicella (Chickenpox)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is varicella?

Varicella, also known as chickenpox, is a highly contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). It spreads easily from person to person.

Who gets chickenpox?

Anyone can get chickenpox if they are not protected through vaccination or prior infection. Children, young adults, and people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for infection. Although fewer adults get chickenpox, adults are more likely than children to develop serious complications from the disease. Chickenpox still occurs in parts of the world where vaccination rates are low.

How do people get chickenpox?

Chickenpox spreads very easily from person to person through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also spread through direct contact with chickenpox blisters or items contaminated with fluid from the blisters. People who are not immune can become infected simply by being in the same room as someone with chickenpox. A person with chickenpox is contagious from 1–2 days before the rash appears until all blisters have dried and formed scabs, usually about 4–5 days after the rash begins.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms usually appear about 10–21 days after exposure to someone with chickenpox.

Early symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Aches
- Sore throat
- Irritability or grumpiness

An itchy blister-like rash then develops, usually starting on the face, chest, or back before spreading to the rest of the body. The rash may also appear inside the mouth or other areas of the body. The blisters usually dry and form scabs within 4–5 days.

What is shingles?

After a person recovers from chickenpox, the varicella-zoster virus remains inactive in the body's nerve cells. Years later, the virus can become active again and cause shingles, also known as herpes zoster. Shingles is more common in adults over age 50 and in people with weakened immune systems due to aging, illness, medications, or certain medical conditions.

Unlike chickenpox, shingles itself is not spread from person to person. However, in rare cases, a person who has never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine may develop chickenpox after direct contact with shingles blisters.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Symptoms often begin with pain, tingling, burning, or numbness on one side of the body, usually on the chest or face. A few days later, a painful blistering rash develops in the same area. In some people, pain may continue for months or even longer after the rash resolves.

How are chickenpox and shingles diagnosed?

A health care provider can usually diagnose chickenpox or shingles based on symptoms, rash appearance, and exposure or medical history. In some cases, laboratory testing may be used to confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment for chickenpox or shingles?

Most cases of chickenpox can be treated with:

- Rest
- Fluids
- Good nutrition
- Medicines to reduce fever or itching, if needed

Some people with severe illness or complications may require antiviral medication or additional medical treatment. For shingles, health care providers may prescribe antiviral medications and pain-relieving treatments to reduce symptoms and complications.

How can chickenpox or shingles be prevented?

Chickenpox and shingles are vaccine-preventable diseases.

Chickenpox (Varicella) Vaccine

The varicella vaccine is recommended for children and adults who are not immune to chickenpox. It is given as a two-dose series.

Shingles Vaccine

Adults age 50 and older should receive two doses of the shingles vaccine, Shingrix (recombinant zoster vaccine), to help prevent shingles and its complications.

Adults age 19 and older with weakened immune systems due to disease or therapy should also receive two doses of Shingrix because they are at increased risk for shingles.

An older shingles vaccine, Zostavax, is no longer available in the United States. People who previously received Zostavax should still receive Shingrix.

Where can I get more information on chickenpox?

- Health care providers
- Local health departments: localhealth.nj.gov
- New Jersey Department of Health: nj.gov/health
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases: nfid.org/infectious-disease/chickenpox/

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.