



Central Michigan District Health Department

Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities



Jennifer Morse, MD, MPH, FAAFP
Medical Director

Steve Hall, RS, MS
Health Officer

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly infectious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus. Symptoms include a blister like-rash, itching, tiredness, headache, 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 the blisters have formed scabs. Chickenpox symptoms may begin 10-21 days following contact to someone who has chickenpox disease, and usually last one week.

Can you get chickenpox even if you have been vaccinated?

Yes, however, the illness causes more mild signs and symptoms in a vaccinated individual. Often there are zero to few blisters-or just red spots, low-grade to no fever, and the duration of illness is much shorter than in an individual who was not vaccinated.

What is chickenpox disease like?

Chickenpox commonly causes an illness that lasts about 4-7 days. 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.

Please visit us at our website www.cmdhd.org

Can a healthy person die from chickenpox disease?

Yes. Prior to the approval of the chickenpox vaccine (1995), each year, an average of 4 million people got varicella disease, 10,500 to 13,000 were hospitalized and 100-150 died. Because of the success of varicella vaccination efforts, varicella cases, hospitalizations and deaths have decreased by more than 90%.

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.