



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Questions and Answers on Chicken Pox (Varicella)

Chicken pox, which is caused by the varicella virus, is an acute communicable disease characterized by an eruption on the skin that makes its appearance in clusters and passes through successive stages of lesions. The typical lesion of chicken pox progresses from a blemish-like elevation to a vesicle/blister and then scabs. The vesicle is characteristic in that it has the appearance of a "teardrop" with a red ring around it.

Q. What causes chicken pox?

A. Chicken pox is caused by a virus. People get it through contact with someone who already has the disease.

Q. What is the incubation period?

A. The incubation period is 14 - 21 days.

Q. What are the symptoms of chicken pox?

A. Symptoms are moderate elevation of temperature, headache, tiredness, and occasional sore throat. The rash breaks out within 24 hours after the onset of fever. Body trunk temperature usually rises further after their appearance. The lesions first appear on the back and chest, later on face, neck, extremities; infrequently on palms and soles. Vesicles found in the mouth may look like small ulcers. Numbers of lesions continue to erupt for a period of 2 to 3 days.

Q. How do I get chicken pox?

A. The mode of transmission is by direct contact with secretions of the nose, throat, and skin. Person-to-person spread occurs by direct contact or droplet infection from sneezing or coughing on someone.

Q. When is the person with chicken pox contagious?

A. The time is from 1 to 2 days before the onset of symptoms until the lesions begin to scab over. Once the scabs appear, the person is no longer contagious.

Q. If I am exposed to chicken pox, what should I do?

A. You should check with your parents to determine if you have had chicken pox as a child. If you have had the disease, then you are protected. There is really nothing you can do if you have not had the disease. If you develop symptoms, seek medical care.

Q. If I have chicken pox, what should I do?

A. Isolation is recommended and do not attend class. Treatment is primarily concerned with decreasing itching and preventing secondary infection. Itching may be relieved by Calamine Lotion or soothing baths using Aveeno colloidal oatmeal bath which can be purchased without a prescription. Wearing mittens or socks on hands at night can prevent scratching. Bathe frequently and keep your hands clean to avoid infecting the lesions. To prevent scarring, do not pick off the scabs. Treatment with the prescription medicine, Acyclovir, may help end the disease earlier. It should be started as early as possible in the disease process to be effective.

Q. What are complications of chicken pox?

A. Complications of chicken pox can include infection of lesions due to scratching. Pneumonia can be a complication also. Sometimes there may be lesions in the throat which can cause swelling and difficulty breathing. The complications are much more severe as you get older.

Q. Is there a vaccine for chicken pox?

A. There is a new chicken pox vaccine that immunizes people against the varicella virus. The chicken pox vaccine is made with a live but weakened form of the varicella virus. For people over the age of 13, this vaccine is given in 2 separate injections, one month apart.

Q. Is there a way to tell if I have had the chicken pox?

A. Yes, a blood test (titer) can be done to determine if you have had the disease. If you are not immune, you should get the vaccine.

Q. Is chicken pox a seasonal disease?

A. Yes, it is most common during the late winter and early spring.

Q. At what age are you most likely to get chicken pox?

A. Chicken pox may occur at any age, but is far more common in children than adults in the U.S. In other parts of the world, chicken pox does not occur until adulthood.

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