



## VARICELLA (Chickenpox)

### What is varicella?

Varicella (also known as Chickenpox) is a very contagious infection caused by a virus. It usually begins with a mild fever and an itchy rash. The rash starts as crops of small, red bumps, which become blistery, oozy, and then crust over. Varicella can result in more serious medical complications such as pneumonia, secondary bacterial infections, hemorrhagic complications, and encephalitis.

### Who gets varicella?

Susceptibility to varicella is universal among those not previously infected or vaccinated. About 90% of children used to get Varicella before the age of 15. Since the introduction of a vaccine, the number of children getting infected has dropped dramatically. It is far less common in adults than children but can still occur.

People at risk for serious complications due to varicella include:

- Infants
- Adolescents
- Pregnant women
- Individuals with weakened immune systems.

### How is varicella spread?

It is spread through exposure to infected fluids from the nose, throat, or skin rash of someone with varicella. This can occur either by sharing breathing space or by directly touching the infected fluids. Varicella is also spread by coming in contact with clothing or articles that are soiled with drainage from the lesions. Varicella is contagious starting two days prior to the onset of the rash until all the lesions have crusted over.

### What are the symptoms of varicella?

Chickenpox is associated with a rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters that eventually turn into scabs. The rash typically appears on the chest, back, and face before spreading over the entire body. Lesions can be seen inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area. The rash usually takes about one week to crust over.

One to two days before the onset of the rash, infected individuals may experience a fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, or a headache.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

It may take as long as two to three weeks after exposure for a person to notice symptoms.

### **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

Persons infected with varicella should be excluded from work or school until all lesions have crusted over, typically about one week. Exposed individuals who are susceptible to varicella should also be excluded from work or school for 21 days.

### **What is the treatment for varicella?**

Varicella is generally not a serious disease and there is no specific treatment for it. The symptoms can be treated with plenty of fluids, rest, fever control, and anti-itching medicines and lotions, such as colloidal oatmeal baths and calamine lotion. Complications resulting from a varicella infection may require intervention from a medical professional.

### **What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of varicella?**

Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent varicella. All children should get two doses of varicella vaccine beginning at age 1. Some teens and adults may also need this vaccine if they didn't get two doses of the vaccine when they were younger.

### **Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Chickenpox (Varicella)  
<https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html>

Heymann, D. (2015). Pneumonia. In D. Heymann (Ed.), *Control of communicable diseases manual* (20th ed.) APHA Press.