

DESCRIPTION

A very contagious disease caused by the herpes zoster virus. Symptoms are usually mild in children and may be more severe in adults. Chickenpox can affect all ages, but is most common in children.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Fever.
- Abdominal pain or a general ill feeling that lasts 1 to 2 days.
- Skin eruptions that appear almost anywhere on the body, including the scalp, penis, and inside the mouth, nose, throat, or vagina. They may be scattered over large areas, and they occur least on the arms and legs. Blisters collapse within 24 hours and form scabs. New crops of blisters erupt every 3 to 4 days.
- Adults have other symptoms that resemble influenza.

CAUSES

- Infection with the herpes zoster virus. It is spread from person to person by airborne droplets or contact with a skin eruption on an infected person. Symptoms may appear 7 to 21 days after exposure.
- A newborn is protected for several months from chickenpox if the mother had the disease before or during pregnancy. The immunity diminishes in 4 to 12 months.

RISK INCREASES WITH

A weakened immune system due to illness or drugs.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Varicella vaccine for healthy children 12 months or older.
- An immune globulin may be used for high-risk persons, such as those who take anticancer or immunosuppressive drugs if they become exposed to the virus.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Children usually recover in 7 to 10 days. Adults may take longer. Adults and persons with weak immune systems are more at risk for complications.
- After recovery, a person has lifelong immunity against a recurrence of chickenpox.
- After chickenpox runs its course, the virus sometimes remains dormant in the body (probably in the roots of nerves near the spinal cord). The same virus may cause shingles many years later.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Bacterial infection of chickenpox blisters. Scarring, if blisters become infected (rare).
- Pneumonia.
- Central nervous system complications (rare).
- Shingles many years later in adulthood (possibly).

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider can diagnose chickenpox by the appearance of the skin eruptions. Medical tests are usually not needed.
- Treatment is directed toward relieving symptoms. Drug therapy may be prescribed for some patients.
- Use cool-water soaks or cool-water compresses to reduce itching.
- Keep the patient as quiet and cool as possible. Heat and sweat trigger itching.
- Keep the nails short to discourage scratching, which can lead to secondary infection.

MEDICATIONS

- To decrease itching: Topical anesthetics and topical antihistamines provide quick, short-term relief. Preparations containing lidocaine and pramoxine are least likely to cause allergic skin reactions. Lotions that contain phenol, menthol, and camphor (such as calamine lotion) may be recommended. Follow package instructions.
- To reduce fever, use acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Never use aspirin, as it may contribute to the development of Reye's syndrome (a form of encephalitis) when given to children during a viral illness.
- An antiviral drug may be prescribed in some cases.

ACTIVITY

- Bed rest is not needed. Allow quiet activity in a cool environment. A child may play outdoors in the shade during nice weather.
- Keep an ill child away from others, and from school, until all blisters have crusted and no new ones occur.

DIET

Blisters in the mouth may make eating and drinking painful. Fluid intake is needed to prevent dehydration. Try Popsicles, cool drinks, and bland foods.

SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF

- Cough, headache, or sensitivity to bright light develop, fever rises, or blisters appear infected.