

F a c t s

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very common childhood illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Fifty percent of children by the age of 5 and 90% by the age of 12 have had this illness. Adults who have never had chickenpox could also become ill.

How is it spread?

It spreads very easily through the air with nasal/saliva secretions or by direct contact with the fluid in the chickenpox blister. Onset of chickenpox is usually 2-3 weeks, commonly 14-16 days, after exposure to someone with chickenpox.

What are the symptoms?

Chickenpox may begin with a sudden onset of fever followed in 1-2 days by a red raised rash. The rash turns into fluid-filled blisters which crust over in 3-4 days. The blisters are very itchy and they commonly occur in successive "crops". Chickenpox is rarely fatal and is more severe for adults and newborns. Once infected with chickenpox, you rarely get chickenpox again.

When is chickenpox contagious?

Chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days and possibly up to 5 days, prior to the onset of the rash. The person remains contagious for 5 days after the onset of the rash or until all the lesions are crusted over.

Exclusions:

Children may return to school or childcare centre as soon as he or she is well enough to participate normally in all activities, regardless of the state of the rash. In 1999 the Canadian Pediatric Society stated that since chickenpox is usually diagnosed after the onset of the rash, excluding children from school or childcare settings after the onset of the rash is not effective in preventing the transmission of the chickenpox virus. If the child had been at school or childcare prior to breaking out, the child would have already exposed the other children. However, parents need to use their best judgment. Keep an ill child home if they have a fever, feel tired, are scratching, and are unable to participate normally in all activities.

— *Health & Environment Facts* —

Complications:

Some complications of chickenpox include secondary bacterial skin and soft tissue infections, ear infections, pneumonia, necrotizing fasciitis, toxic shock-like syndrome, hepatitis, bacteremia, stroke and encephalitis.

Vaccination:

There is a chickenpox (varicella) vaccine available to prevent chickenpox. Children 12 months to 12 years of age require a single dose. Adults and children 13 years of age and over require two vaccine doses administered 4 to 8 weeks apart. The vaccine is 98% effective. It takes 1-2 weeks to build antibodies to provide protection. Immunization is available through physician offices or at Public Health. Public Health holds immunization clinics in Owen Sound, Walkerton, and in Port Elgin. To make an appointment, please call 519-376-9420 or 519-881-1920.

Children are eligible for publicly-funded varicella vaccine if:

- They were born on or after September 1, 2003, or
- They are five years of age on or after January 1, 2005, and have not yet had chickenpox.

The following “high-risk” persons are eligible to receive publicly-funded vaccine:

- Children and adolescents given chronic salicylic acid therapy
- All individuals with cystic fibrosis
- Immunocompromised individuals

People may also purchase the vaccine. It costs \$75.00 per dose at public health clinics.

For more information:

Please call Public Health at 519-376-9420 or visit the website www.publichealthgreybruce.on.ca