

## CHICKENPOX

SYNONYMS: Varicella

### WHAT IS CHICKENPOX

Chickenpox is an acute infection caused by a virus. It is extremely common in children and an estimated 90% of all children will have had chickenpox by the age of 10 years. Older children and adults who have not had chickenpox as a child can also get it.

### HOW DOES SOMEONE GET CHICKENPOX

Chickenpox is extremely contagious and spreads by “droplet infection”. People who have chickenpox generate airborne particles from their respiratory secretions – when someone who is not immune to chickenpox breathes these particles, he can catch the disease. It can also spread by direct contact with the lesions present on a patient.

A patient with chickenpox is infectious from 1-2 days before the rash appears until all the lesions have completely crusted over. Since he is infectious even before he knows he is ill, it is very difficult to prevent spread of the disease.

### WHAT ARE THE CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF CHICKENPOX

The incubation period, that is the time from exposure to actual development of the disease, is between 10 to 21 days.

Initially the child may have only a mild fever or malaise (feeling of being unwell). Then the rash appears, first on the scalp, neck or upper trunk. The rash develops in 12 to 24 hours into the typical fluid filled vesicles characteristic of chickenpox. New crops of vesicles continue to appear for another 2-5 days and the rash can involve the whole body and even the inside of the mouth or eyes. The child may have a higher fever by now and the rash is very itchy. The vesicles are easily broken. The clear fluid turns into pus and then the lesions gradually dry up, crust over and heal. The total course may be 5-10 days.

### IS CHICKENPOX DANGEROUS

In the majority of children, chickenpox is usually a mild illness that resolves by itself without any long-term effects. However, some patients can have complications.

Chickenpox is generally more severe if the patient is older (adolescent or adult). It can be a very serious illness if the patient is immunocompromised (that is, has a weak immune system and cannot fight infections well) – such patients include those with certain immune disorders, those receiving treatment for leukemia or cancer, and those receiving treatment with steroids for a long time.

If you are a pregnant lady (or think you may be pregnant) and either have developed or been exposed to chickenpox, please see your doctor immediately – chickenpox can be dangerous to the developing baby. Similarly, if a woman develops chickenpox a few days before or few days after delivering a child, the disease can spread to the newborn baby.

## WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF CHICKENPOX

Older patients tend to be sicker with chickenpox, and may have a higher fever or body aches. The rash may also be more severe and the course of illness longer.

The commonest complication is generally secondary bacterial infection of the lesions. Other complications include pneumonia, hepatitis and involvement of the brain.

As already mentioned, complications are uncommon.

## TREATMENT OF CHICKENPOX

### HOME MANAGEMENT

Give the child plenty of fluids to drink and encourage him to rest. He can eat or drink anything he wants. If the child has lesions inside the mouth and is reluctant to eat/drink, he may like to have cold drinks/juices/water and soft things like ice cream.

Fever and malaise can be treated with Paracetamol.

Itching is often the biggest problem and should be discouraged because scratching leads to secondary infection of the lesions. Cut the child's nails short and keep them clean so that he does less damage when he scratches. You can apply Lacto Calamine lotion and talcum powder to the skin – do not use prickly heat powder since this can irritate open lesions. Your doctor can prescribe medication to help itching (antihistamines, like Avil). In infants, it may help to put a sock on each hand so that scratching is minimized.

Contrary to popular belief, the child should bathe regularly. Bathing will not make him worse and will reduce secondary infection. A warm (not hot) bath will also reduce itching. A little baking soda (2-4 teaspoons per bucket of water) added to the bath water will help the itching – baking soda is also known as Cooking Soda and is available in most department stores [please note: it is different from Baking Powder]

The child should not go to school until all the lesions have crusted over. He should also be kept away from other children who have not had chickenpox and from people who are immunocompromised or pregnant.

### MEDICAL TREATMENT

Not every patient needs medicines. In general, your doctor may prescribe medications if the illness is severe, or if there are complications, or if the patient is from a group that is more prone for developing serious disease.

Antibiotics may be given for secondary infection.

*ACYCLOVIR* is a medicine that acts against the virus that causes chickenpox. It will reduce the severity and course of the illness, if started within 24 hours of onset of the illness. It does not prevent the patient from transmitting the disease.

## ASPIRIN AND STEROIDS SHOULD NOT BE GIVEN TO SOMEONE WITH CHICKENPOX

### IMMUNITY

Generally one develops lifetime immunity after having chickenpox and therefore should not get the disease again.

However, people who have had chickenpox can occasionally get a condition called *Herpes Zoster* in adulthood.

### VACCINATION FOR CHICKENPOX

An effective vaccine has recently become available for chickenpox. A person who has already had the disease does not need the vaccine, since he will be immune. Since chickenpox is a mild disease in most children, it may not be necessary to vaccinate every child. However, older children and adults who have not had chickenpox should receive the vaccine, as should people who are liable to have severe complications if they get the disease. Ask your pediatrician whether your child should receive the vaccine.