

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Chickenpox (Varicella)

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also called varicella, is caused by a very contagious virus. People with chickenpox get an itchy rash that looks like tiny blisters. It usually starts on the face, stomach, chest or back, and spreads to other parts of the body. A mild fever, tiredness, and slight body discomfort usually come with the rash. Anyone who hasn't had chickenpox already can get it, but it is most common among children under 15 years old. More than 90% of US adults have already had chickenpox.

Is chickenpox dangerous?

Yes, it can be. Chickenpox can lead to severe skin infection, scars, pneumonia, brain damage and death. About 12,000 people are hospitalized for chickenpox each year in the US, and about 100 people die. Serious complications (such as pneumonia) are rare, but are more common in newborns, pregnant women, people with weak immune systems, and adults in general. A person who has had chickenpox can also get a painful rash called shingles years later.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing, or touching the rash. People with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1-2 days before symptoms start until all the lesions are crusted over (usually about 5 days). Symptoms usually appear about 2–3 weeks after exposure to the virus. However, people with weak immune systems are contagious longer, usually as long as new blisters keep appearing. Under state regulations, people with chickenpox must stay out of school and work until all their blisters have dried and crusted.

Who gets chickenpox?

- Anyone who has never had chickenpox and has never been vaccinated.
- Babies younger than 12 months old, because they are too young to be vaccinated.

How can you prevent chickenpox?

- Protect your children by having them vaccinated when they are 12-18 months old, or at any age after that if they have never had chickenpox. It is important to make sure susceptible children get vaccinated before their 13th birthday due to an increased risk of complications after this age.
- Adolescents and adults who are not immune to chickenpox, particularly those who are health care workers or who live with someone who has a weakened immune system should be vaccinated. Women who plan to have children and are not immune should also be vaccinated. Adolescents (aged 13 and older) and adults need two doses of varicella vaccine for protection.
- If a person receives chickenpox vaccine within 3 days of being in contact with someone with chickenpox, there is a good chance they won't get sick.
- Some unvaccinated and nonimmune people (such as newborns, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems) who become exposed to chickenpox should get a shot of VZIG (instead of vaccine) to lower their chances of severe complications like pneumonia. This shot must be given less than 96 hours (four days) after exposure. VZIG offers only short-term protection, so anyone who gets it will still need to be vaccinated as described above in order to have long-term protection against chickenpox.
- State regulations require certain groups to be vaccinated against chickenpox. Susceptible children attending licensed day care or preschool, and those entering kindergarten, must show proof of receiving 1 dose of varicella vaccine or reliable proof of immunity. Those entering 7th grade must show proof of receiving 2 doses of varicella

vaccine or reliable proof of immunity. A reliable history is defined as 1) physician interpretation of parent/guardian description of chicken-pox; 2) physician diagnosis of chickenpox; or 3) serologic proof of immunity.

Should pregnant women worry about chickenpox?

Pregnant women who have already had chickenpox do not need to worry. Women who get chickenpox while they are pregnant are more likely than other adults to develop serious complications: the fetus can also be affected. Babies born to mothers with a current case of chickenpox can develop high fevers and other serious problems.

Pregnant women who have been exposed to somebody with chickenpox should see a doctor **immediately**. Those who are not sure if they had chickenpox as a child can have a blood test to see if they are protected against the virus. If not, they may need to get a shot of VZIG (varicella zoster immune globulin) to lower their chances of severe complications.

Can you get chickenpox more than once?

No. Once you have had chickenpox, you cannot get it again. However, the virus that causes chickenpox stays in your body the rest of your life. Years later it can give you a rash called shingles, which doctors call "herpes zoster." The shingles rash looks like chickenpox, but it usually shows up on only one part of your body and does not spread. Unlike chickenpox, shingles is painful. Children sometimes get shingles, but it is more common among adults. Touching fluid from the shingles rash can spread the virus that causes chickenpox to people who are not immune.

Is varicella vaccine safe?

Yes, it is safe for most people. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing problems like fever, mild rash, temporary pain or stiffness in the joints, and allergic reactions. More severe problems are very rare. About 70–90% of people who get the vaccine are protected from chickenpox. If vaccinated people do get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. They have a milder rash with fewer spots, lower fevers, and get better faster. They can still spread chickenpox to others who are not immune, but those contacts tend to have very mild disease as well.

Who should not get varicella vaccine?

- People who have serious allergies to gelatin, the drug neomycin, or a previous dose of the vaccine.
- Pregnant women should not get varicella vaccine until after they deliver their babies.
- People with cancer, HIV, or other problems that weaken the immune system should check with their doctor or nurse before being vaccinated.
- People who recently had a blood transfusion or were given other blood products should ask their doctor when they may get chickenpox vaccine.
- People with high fevers should not be vaccinated until after the fever and other symptoms are gone.

Where can you get more information?

- **Your doctor, nurse or clinic**
- **Your local board of health** (listed in the phone book under local government)
- **The Massachusetts Department of Public Health** (MDPH) Immunization Program at **(617) 983-6800** or toll-free at **1-888-658-2850**, or on the MDPH Website at <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/>, or the regional offices of the MDPH Immunization Program:

Central Immunization Office, West Boylston	(508) 792-7880
Metro/Boston* Immunization Office, Jamaica Plain	(617) 983-6860
Northeast Immunization Office, Tewksbury	(978) 851-7261
Southeast Immunization Office, Lakeville	(508) 947-1231
Western Immunization Office, Amherst	(413) 545-6600

*For Boston providers/residents, you may also call the Boston Health Commission at (617) 534-5611.