

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, a member of the herpes virus family. Chickenpox is a common, very contagious childhood illness. Although usually mild, chickenpox can be serious. The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine prevents the disease. All children attending child care facilities and entering schools in North Dakota are required to be vaccinated against chickenpox.

Who is at risk for chickenpox?

People who have not previously had chickenpox or have not been vaccinated are at risk for developing the disease. Newborn babies, people who have weakened immune systems, adolescents and adults can get very sick from chickenpox.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Early symptoms of chickenpox are a mild fever, runny nose and cough. The skin rash begins a bit later as red bumps on the chest, back, underarms, neck and face. Within several hours, the bumps turn into small blisters; after a few days, the blisters break and then form scabs. The chickenpox sores often occur in clusters, with bumps, blisters and scabs all present at the same time. The rash and sores itch.

Some people who have been vaccinated against chickenpox can still get the disease. The symptoms are almost always mild with fewer blisters and mild or no fever.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear between 10 and 21 days (usually 14 to 16 days) after exposure to the disease.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person through direct contact with fluid from the blisters or discharge from the nose or mouth. A person who has chickenpox can release tiny drops of the virus into the air by coughing or sneezing; another person can catch the disease by breathing in the drops of virus in the air.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Chickenpox can be spread from one to two days before the rash appears until all blisters have become scabs (usually about five to six days after the first blisters appear).

How is a person diagnosed?

Chickenpox may be diagnosed clinically by a health care provider, but a laboratory test to confirm chickenpox is recommended.

What is the treatment?

The best treatment is bed rest at home, keeping fingernails short to prevent secondary bacterial infection from scratching, frequent bathing, application of Calamine lotion and acetaminophen for fever. **DO NOT GIVE ASPIRIN OR OTHER MEDICATION THAT CONTAINS SALICYLATE TO ANYONE YOUNGER THAN 18.** When children take aspirin for viral illnesses like chickenpox, they are at risk of developing Reye syndrome, a serious condition that can cause death.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Chickenpox generally results in lifelong immunity. However, this infection may remain hidden and reoccur years later as herpes zoster (shingles) in some older adults and sometimes in children.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have chickenpox?

Yes. The best way to prevent spreading chickenpox to others is for children and adults who have the disease to stay home. Children who have chickenpox should be excluded from activities, including attending school or child care, until all the blisters have dried into scabs and no new blisters have started for 24 hours. Immunized children without scabs may return when no new lesions appear within a 24-hour period. This usually takes five to six days after the rash begins.

Children who were exposed to chickenpox but don't show any symptoms of the disease do not need to stay home unless they develop chickenpox.

What can be done to prevent the spread of chickenpox?

The North Dakota Department of Health recommends the following:

1. All children between 12 and 18 months of age should be vaccinated with one dose of chickenpox (varicella) vaccine. A second dose is recommended at 4 to 6 years of age. A combination vaccine is also available (MMRV) that protects against measles, mumps, rubella and varicella. Anyone, including adolescents and adults, who have not been vaccinated and who have not had the disease need two doses of varicella vaccine.
2. During chickenpox outbreaks, people who have received only one dose of chickenpox vaccine should be given a second dose. The second dose should be given at least one month after the first dose for children older than 13. In children ages 12 months to 12 years, the second dose should be given at least three months after the first.
3. If you think your child has chickenpox, call your health-care provider. Do not go to the health care provider's office without calling first.
4. Practice good hand washing after being in contact with secretions from the nose or mouth or the blister fluid of someone who has chickenpox. Good hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of chickenpox and other infectious diseases.
5. Unvaccinated people who have not had chickenpox should call their health-care provider immediately if they are exposed to someone who has chickenpox. Receiving the vaccine within three to five days after exposure may prevent the disease.
6. Pregnant women or people who have weakened immune systems who are exposed to someone with chickenpox, and who have not been vaccinated or have not previously had chickenpox, should contact a health-care provider immediately for possible preventative treatment.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndhealth.gov/disease or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health.

Resource:

American Academy of Pediatrics. [Varicella-Zoster Virus Infections.] In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2018-2021 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 31st ed. Itasca, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2018-2021: 869-882