

UniversityHealthServices

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CHICKENPOX

Chickenpox is a common, acute and highly contagious infection caused by the herpes virus varicella zoster (VZ), the same virus then in its latent period causes herpes zoster (shingles).

Chickenpox can occur at any age, but it's most common in two to eight year olds. Second attacks are rare. This infection is transmitted by direct contact (primarily, with secretions from the respiratory tract; less often, with fluid from the "blisters" of persons with herpes zoster) and indirect contact (air waves may carry the virus from room to room).

The incubation period lasts from 13 to 17 days. Chickenpox is probably communicable from one day before lesions erupt to six days after vesicles (blisters) form. It is most contagious in the early stages of eruption of the skin lesions.

Chickenpox occurs worldwide and is always present in large cities. It affects all races and both sexes equally. In temperate areas, incidence is higher during later autumn, winter, and spring.

Signs and symptoms

Chickenpox produces a distinctive itchy rash. Prior to an outbreak there may be fever, a feeling of being "sick", and a lack of appetite. Within 24 hours, the rash begins as crops of small reddened patches on the scalp or trunk that progress to small conical elevations and then clear blisters on a reddened base. These become cloudy and break easily; then scabs form. The rash spreads to the face and rarely to the extremities. New blisters continue to appear for three to four days, so the rash contains a combination of red rash, blisters and scabs in various stages. Occasionally, chickenpox also produces shallow ulcers on mucous membrane of the mouth, eyes, and genitals.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis rests on the characteristic clinical signs, and usually doesn't require lab tests. However, the virus can be isolated from blister fluid within the first three or four days of rash. Blood will contain antibodies as early as seven days after onset.

Treatment and self-care

- Viruses do not respond to typical antibiotics. However, there is an antiviral medication (Zovirax), which must be initiated within 48 hours of onset to be effective in shortening the course of the disease. This medication is costly.
- Avoid contact with people who have not had the disease. Persons who are immunosuppressed may develop serious complications if exposed to chickenpox. You will be asked to make other living arrangements if you reside in a residence hall and you will not be permitted to attend class until you are no longer contagious.

There are a number of things you can do to feel better:

- Take acetaminophen (1000 mg) every four to six hours for fever and discomfort unless a health care provider advises against medication.
- Avoid aspirin. Aspirin can cause a toxic reaction in the liver for someone with chickenpox.
- Avoid scratching the blisters or scabs.
- Maintain good personal hygiene. Warm showers are allowed and recommended.
- Calamine lotion applied to the rash will relieve the itching. Your health care provider may recommend other medications for severe itching.
- Rest. This is no time to be exercising. Your body is fighting a viral infection.
- Increase your daily fluid intake. This will help to keep your fever down.

- You may return to class when all skin vesicles (blisters) have scabbed over (usually one week after the onset of the rash).

Test Results and Advice Nurse

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

Appointments

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at www.sa.psu.edu/uhs

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Derm_Chicpox_010100 Approved by Patient Education Committee: 01/01/00

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