

Chickenpox (Shingles)

Community and Public Health

Phone: 03 364 1777

Web: www.cph.co.nz

Chickenpox is a common childhood illness that is easily spread. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus. It mostly affects children under the age of 10 years and over 90% of the population have had chickenpox by the age of 15 years. One infection usually gives long-lasting immunity. However the virus can remain in the body and be reactivated in later life to cause 'shingles'.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear 10 to 21 days after exposure to the virus (usually 14 to 16 days). Chickenpox starts with 'sudden onset of fever, some cough and a lack of energy. A skin rash appears soon after as small raised red spots. These may be only a few or many and while most common on the covered parts, can spread over the whole body. The spots form blisters in a few hours, that soon burst to leave open sores. These sores then scab over in 3 or 4 days.



Several crops of these blisters may come out over a period of days, so that at any one time there may be sores in various stages of development. Full recovery usually takes 7 to 10 days after the symptoms first appear.

How is it caught or spread?

When a child catches the virus, it spreads rapidly throughout the body, affecting first the nose and throat and later the rest of the body. It is spread during the early illness by coughing but later spread can occur by direct contact with moist skin sores.

People are infectious for as long as 5 days, but usually 1 to 2 days before onset of rash and until all blisters have formed crusts (usually 5 days).

How is it treated?

Usually you can only treat the symptoms. Calamine lotion or an antihistamine medicine like phenegan may ease the itch from the rash. A daily bath in tepid water is recommended, then dry by patting with a clean, soft towel rather than rubbing.

Children should avoid scratching as this increases the risk of secondary bacterial infection and possible scarring.

Rest and plenty of fluids are important. Paracetamol may be helpful but pain relieving medicines containing aspirin should not be given to children with chickenpox because it can increase the risk of serious complications.

Antibiotics are of no use against viruses like chickenpox, but may be needed if a bacterial infection also develops.

Antiviral medications may be prescribed by a doctor, but are used only in adolescents and adults who have severe disease. They must be started within the first 3 days of the rash appearing - preferably on day 1.

How is spread prevented?

Cover the nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, dispose of used tissues, wash hands carefully after contact, and don't share eating utensils, food and drinking cups.

Keep those with chickenpox away from school, pre-school or work until all the blisters have crusted, and the person feels well.

Pregnant women should avoid contact with cases of chickenpox, as infection can harm both the mother and the unborn baby. A doctor should be contacted immediately if a pregnant woman develops symptoms.

What about vaccination?

A vaccine against chickenpox is available for children aged 15 months born from 1st April 2016, as part of the National Immunisation Schedule. Those who haven't been infected or previously immunised against chickenpox are eligible for one free dose when they turn 11 years of age.

Chickenpox immunisation is available in New Zealand at a cost for everyone else. It is mostly recommended for children with a small range of serious health problems who may require organ transplantation.

What is shingles?

Shingles is caused by the reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus and can only occur in people who have had chickenpox previously. Consequently it is more common in older people.

Shingles is characterised by the development of a painful rash with groups of blisters and sores. The rash generally occurs in a band on one side of the body or on part of the head overlaying the nerves where the virus had been dormant.

The rash may last for 3 to 5 weeks, but the associated pain can continue for even longer. The virus can be spread to others by direct contact with the moist shingles rash.

It is therefore desirable to stay away from school or work unless the rash can be covered up by clothing and the blisters have dried up.

People who have had the illness can return to work, school or preschool as soon as they feel well enough to attend.

Other resources available on childhood illnesses:

- Hand, foot and mouth
- Impetigo
- Ringworm
- Rotavirus
- Slapped cheek disease
- Threadworms

Image sourced from Preventing chickenpox website.

Community and Public Health: Community Health Information Centres

Christchurch

Phone: 03 378 6721

Fax: 03 379 6125

chic@cdhb.health.nz

Ashburton

Phone: 03 307 6902

Fax: 03 307 8081

ashburton.chic@cdhb.health.nz

Timaru

Phone: 03 687 2600

Fax: 03 688 6091

timaru.chic@cdhb.health.nz

Greymouth

Phone: 03 768 1160

Fax: 03 768 1169

westcoast.chic@cdhb.health.nz