

Varicella, often called chickenpox, is a disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. The virus passes easily from one person to another.

SYMPTOMS

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Head and/or body aches
- Itchy fluid-filled blisters

Symptoms usually begin between 10 to 21 days after being with someone who has chickenpox.

Chickenpox is often a mild disease in children that lasts 5 to 10 days. Infants, teens and adults can get quite sick and have problems like:

- Infections of the skin, bone, joints or blood
- Losing too much fluid through vomiting or diarrhea (dehydration)
- Pneumonia
- Infection or swelling of the brain
- Death (rarely)

TREATMENT

Chickenpox symptoms are treated with bed rest, medicines to reduce fever (not aspirin) and baths or lotions to make the blisters less itchy.

HOW IT SPREADS

Chickenpox spreads easily when:

- an infected person coughs or sneezes and you breathe in the tiny droplets.
- you touch something that has the virus on it and then put your fingers in your mouth or nose
- you touch a sick person's chickenpox or shingles (also caused by the varicella-zoster virus) blisters

A person with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1 to 2 days before the blisters appear until all of the blisters have formed scabs.

PREVENTION

The best way to prevent chickenpox is through vaccination. Anyone over one year of age who has not had the disease or been vaccinated should get the vaccine. In North Carolina, chickenpox vaccine is required for people born on or after April 1, 2001. Babies should get their first shot between 12 to 15 months of age. Children need a booster shot between 4 and 6 years of age. Anyone over 13 years of age needs two shots given 4 to 8 weeks apart.

A few vaccinated people may get a mild case of chickenpox. Most have fewer blisters and get well quickly. Vaccine prevents most severe disease. Before the vaccine (1995) about 11,000 people went to the hospital and 100 people died from chickenpox in the US each year.