

What To Do When Chickenpox Strikes

Chickenpox, or varicella, is a highly contagious but usually mild childhood illness caused by a virus. Chickenpox is easy to recognize. The rash starts with itchy red bumps that turn into blisters and then form scabs. They can be found on all parts of the body.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

When children get chickenpox, they are contagious one to two days before the rash appears, and until all the sores are crusted over, which takes seven to 10 days. Siblings usually come down with chickenpox within 14 to 16 days, and the second case in the family usually has many more sores than the first. The infected child should avoid contact with anyone who has not had chickenpox.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

For itching:

- A lukewarm bath with either colloidal oatmeal or baking soda
- Calamine lotion on the spots
- Over-the-counter oral medicine containing diphenhydramine or a medicine recommended by the child's doctor
- Avoid creams or lotions containing hydrocortisone; these can lead to a more severe case because they contain steroids or diphenhydramine, which, if used in addition to oral diphenhydramine, may lead to overdose of the medication because it is absorbed through the skin

For fever:

- Acetaminophen, as recommended by a doctor
- Plenty of fluids
- Avoid ibuprofen and aspirin, which may contribute to serious complications of chickenpox

For scarring:

- Cut the child's fingernails to discourage infection or scarring of scabbed lesions
- Chickenpox may leave permanent scars if the scabs are repeatedly picked off; temporary marks on the skin may take six to 12 months to completely fade

Call the child's doctor with questions or concerns. The following symptoms are of special concern when children have chickenpox:

- Vomiting
- Confusion
- Cough
- Fever after four days
- Chest pain
- Back pain
- Stomach pain
- Red appearance of skin, either generalized or a localized red area covering the area between several pox
- Not drinking enough to urinate
- Persistent fatigue beyond what you would expect with a minor illness, such as a cold with fever

Chickenpox no longer has to be a rite of passage for children. A vaccine called Varivax[®] is available for children older than 1 year and adults. Children who receive the vaccine are considered protected against chickenpox four to six weeks after the injection, but are susceptible to infection prior to that time. Varivax given within three days of exposure to chickenpox may partially protect a child from a severe case of chickenpox. As of January 2000, the vaccine is required for children entering either kindergarten or sixth grade unless they have healthcare provider documentation of disease history or proof of serologic immunity. As of 2008, a second dose of the vaccine is required for sixth-graders.

This general information should not be used as a substitute or in place of contacting your child's healthcare provider. If you need further assistance, call 404-250-KIDS to speak to a pediatric nurse. Visit www.choa.org/teachingsheets for more information.

