



## Island County Public Health

Communicable Disease Program

### Chickenpox

You are being provided with this fact sheet:

☐ because you or your child may have been exposed to chickenpox if they were present on the following dates:

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If you believe your child has chickenpox, contact your healthcare provider. Notify your childcare provider or school if a diagnosis of chickenpox is made.

☐ for informational purposes only.

#### What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a very contagious illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV), a type of herpes virus. It is often a mild illness but may be severe in infants, pregnant women, adults, and persons with weakened immune systems.

#### What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?

Chickenpox has a characteristic itchy rash that often starts on the face, back and chest. It may spread to the rest of the body including the inside of the mouth, ears, eyelids, or genitals. The rash appears as pink or red spots and tiny fluid-filled blisters ("pox") that then dry and become scabs, usually in 3 to 5 days but may take up to a week. The rash may be the first sign of illness, and sometimes occurs with fever, headache, loss of appetite, runny nose, cough and general fatigue. An infected person may have anywhere from only a few poxes to more than 500 (average 300-400) pox on their body during the illness. Chickenpox can sometimes have severe complications such as bacterial skin infections and pneumonia.

#### Chickenpox in vaccinated individuals (breakthrough Varicella).

Some children or adults who have been vaccinated against chickenpox may still get the disease. However, symptoms are usually milder with fewer or no blisters (or just red spots), a mild or no fever, and are sick for a shorter period than people who are not vaccinated. Some vaccinated people may have symptoms similar to unvaccinated people.

#### How is Chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox virus is highly contagious and is spread by direct contact with saliva or the fluid from the pox of an infected individual or by respiratory droplets released into the air from sneezing or coughing. The illness usually starts 14 to 16 days after contact with an infected person, with a range of 10 to 21 days. Infected persons are contagious from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears and are most contagious while the rash is spreading. They remain contagious until all the pox have formed scabs, which is about 5 days from when the pox appeared. An infected person should remain home until all pox are scabbed over. A person who has never had chickenpox or chickenpox vaccine has a 90% chance of becoming infected if exposed to a person who has the virus. Chickenpox can also be spread by direct contact with the blisters of a person with shingles if the person has never had chickenpox and has not received the varicella vaccine.

### What should I do if I've been exposed to chickenpox?

If you are already immune to chickenpox, you most likely won't become sick. Most people do not get chickenpox more than once. If you're not already immune to chickenpox, the varicella vaccine given within 3-5 days of exposure can possibly prevent chickenpox or lessen the severity of the illness. Persons at high risk for complications from chickenpox, such as immunocompromised persons, infants, and pregnant women, should contact their health care provider immediately. Additionally, individuals over the age of 12 may be at higher risk for complications and should contact their health care provider for guidance.

### How is chickenpox treated?

General comfort measures are all that are needed for most cases of chickenpox. Keeping fingernails short and clean can help avoid the spread of infection from scratching. Fever reducing medication, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, may be given if the child has a fever. Never give aspirin to a child, as this has been associated with Reye's Syndrome. If symptoms worsen quickly, consult a health care provider immediately. High-risk individuals such as pregnant women, immunocompromised people, and those over the age of 12 may be prescribed antiviral medications to reduce the likelihood of serious complications.

### How is Chickenpox prevented?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent chickenpox. The vaccine is highly effective at preventing chickenpox, especially severe cases of the illness and its complications. All healthy children should routinely receive their first dose of vaccine at 12-15 months of age. A second dose of vaccine is routinely recommended for all children 4-6 years of age. Children 13 years and older and adults who do not have evidence of prior immunity should receive 2 doses of vaccine. Second dose catch-up vaccination is recommended for children, adolescents, and adults who previously received 1 dose. Contact your health care provider for more information. Cleaning and sanitizing surfaces, practicing good handwashing, and ventilating rooms with fresh outdoor air also help prevent the spread of chickenpox.

### When does a child need to stay home from childcare or school?

Children with chickenpox need to be excluded from childcare or school until all the blisters have formed scabs. In immunized children who have mild infection where the vesicles do not form crusts, exclude until no new red bumps have appeared for at least 24 hours. Additionally, the child should be fever-free for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication.

A child should not attend childcare or school if one or more of the following applies:

- Fever (defined as temperature above 100.4°F)
- Has open skin lesions
- Does not feel well enough to participate in classroom activities

Adapted from materials developed by Snohomish County Health Department.

#### References:

*American Academy of Pediatrics*, Managing Infectious Diseases in Child Care and Schools, 6th edition.

*American Academy of Pediatrics*, Red Book: 2021-2024 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases, 32nd ed.

*Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (Website)*, Chickenpox (Varicella), <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html>, Accessed, December 2023.

*Marshall, Gary M, MD*, The Vaccine Handbook: A Practical Guide for Clinicians, 4th ed.

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