PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Chickenpox and Chickenpox Exposure

This information explains chickenpox and chickenpox exposure, including how it's spread and treated.

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection that is caused by the varicella virus. It's a common illness that causes an itchy rash and red spots or blisters (pox) all over the body.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms of chickenpox can include muscle aches, fever, and an itchy rash or blisters.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox can be spread through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of someone who is infected. The droplets move through the air when the person coughs or sneezes. You can also get chickenpox by touching an infected person's blisters.

A person with chickenpox is contagious (give to others) 1 to 2 days before their rash appears. The remain contagious until all their blisters are dried and crusted.

When chickenpox is gone, the varicella virus stays in the body as an inactive virus (virus that is in your body but not making you sick). Sometimes, the virus can become active again and cause shingles. Shingles (also known as herpes zoster) causes a painful rash. It usually develops in people who have serious illnesses or weakened immune systems.

What happens if you're exposed to chickenpox?

Tell your healthcare provider if you or someone you live with has been exposed to chickenpox. Your healthcare provider will ask you about your history of chickenpox. They may do a blood test to see if you're immune to chickenpox.

If you have spent time close to a person who has chickenpox, you will be monitored to see if you develop it. It usually takes 10 to 21 days for the symptoms of chickenpox to start showing after someone has been exposed to the infection. This is called the incubation period. Your healthcare provider will tell you what your incubation period is.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

Chickenpox can be treated with antiviral medication (medications that fight viruses). Other medications may be used to decrease itching and discomfort from the blisters.

What precautions are taken in the hospital if I have chickenpox?

Isolation precautions are steps we take to stop infections from spreading from person to person. If you're diagnosed with or exposed to chickenpox while you're in the hospital:

- You will be placed in a private room.
- The door to your room must stay closed at all times.
- A sign will be posted on your door telling all staff to clean their hands. They can use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before going into and after leaving your room.
- All staff will need to wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a respirator mask while in your room.
- If you leave your room for diagnostic tests, you must wear a mask, yellow gown, and gloves.

- You will not be able to walk around the unit or go to these areas of the hospital:
  - Pantry on your unit
  - Pediatric recreation areas in PACC or M9
  - Cafeteria
  - Main lobby
  - Any other public area of the hospital
- You can have art or massage therapy in your room while following isolation precautions.

You will need to follow these precautions until all your blisters are dried and crusted. Your healthcare provider will tell you when you can stop following these precautions.

Where can I get more information about chickenpox?

If you have any questions, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also visit these websites for more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/chickenpox

New York State Department of Health
www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/chickenpox/fact_sheet.htm

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Chickenpox and Chickenpox Exposure - Last updated on November 28, 2025
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center