

ALLEGAN COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Office Administration

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Bioterrorism Preparedness

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Personal Health

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Communicable Disease

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Environmental Health

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Resource Recovery

(269) 673-5415

Chickenpox

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious viral illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Once a person gets chickenpox, they will generally not get it again. However, the virus remains dormant in a person's body and may reactivate years later as herpes zoster (shingles).

Who gets chickenpox?

Most cases of chickenpox occur in persons less than 15 years of age, although persons of any age can become infected. Chickenpox can be serious, even life-threatening. It is possible for a person to get a milder form of chickenpox, even if they have received the vaccine.

What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?

Symptoms begin 2-3 weeks after exposure and range from mild to severe. Symptoms include fever, general flu or cold-like symptoms, followed by an itchy pimple-like rash. The rash appears in successive crops over several days. The pimple-like rash progresses to fluid-filled blisters and blisters progress to scabs. Rash first appears on trunk and face, but can spread over the entire body and can occur on mucous membranes such as the eye, mouth, and throat.

How is it spread?

It is spread by direct contact with fluid from blisters on an infected person, from contact with articles soiled with discharge from blisters or mucous membranes of a person with chickenpox. It can also be caused by breathing in droplets projected in the air by an infected person through coughing or sneezing.

How long is the person contagious?

Chickenpox is contagious usually 1-2 days before rash onset and until all blisters are crusted over (usually 5 days).

Is there a treatment?

Most cases of chickenpox resolve on their own without specific treatment. Mild cases require only rest and plenty of fluids. Calamine lotion and oatmeal baths may help relieve the itching. Tylenol or Motrin can be used to reduce fever and relieve minor aches and pains. Children and teens with chickenpox should not use an aspirin product because they increase the risk of developing Reye Syndrome. Some people may be prescribed antiviral drugs. It is a good idea to keep fingernails short to prevent infecting the rash through scratching.

Are there complications from chickenpox?

Infants, adolescents, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems because of illness or medications may be at high risk for complications from chickenpox. Serious complications from chickenpox include dehydration, pneumonia, infection or inflammation of the brain, blood stream infections, and bone and joint infections. Some people with complications from chickenpox can become so sick that they need to be hospitalized. Chickenpox can cause death.

How can Chickenpox be prevented?

The best way to prevent cases is to have the highest possible level of immunization in the community. This can be achieved by ensuring that all recommended vaccine doses are given at the recommended time. Chickenpox vaccine is recommended for children, adolescents, and adults without a reliable history of chickenpox. All children less than 13 years of age should receive two doses of varicella-containing vaccine, with the first dose administered at 12-15 months of age, and the second dose at 4-6 years of age. People over 13 years of age who have never had the chickenpox or received chickenpox vaccine should get 3 doses at least 28 days apart.

People infected with chickenpox should remain at home to avoid exposing others. A person with chickenpox should stay home from school, work, daycare, any group setting, for at least five days after the rash first appeared or until the blisters have crusted over.

More information can be found at www.cdc.gov/chickenpox

This fact sheet is not intended to replace the advice of your physician. Parents should contact their healthcare provider if they have concerns regarding their child's health. If you have general questions, you may contact an Allegan County Public Health Nurse at 269-673-5411.