

Varicella (chickenpox): What you need to know

What is varicella (chickenpox) and what are the symptoms?

Varicella is a highly contagious viral disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is characterized by an **itchy rash made up of fluid-filled blisters** that eventually scab over. Other symptoms that commonly appear 1 to 2 days before the rash include fever, headaches, and a runny nose.

In severe cases, varicella can lead to:

- blood infections,
- brain inflammation,
- pneumonia (lung infection),
- bacterial skin infections/scarring,
- hospitalization, and
- death (in rare cases).

After you have recovered from varicella, your body does not rid itself of the varicella-zoster virus. Instead, the virus **remains dormant in your body**, specifically in your **nerves**. The virus can then **reactivate** later in life, causing **shingles**.

How is it spread?

1. Through direct contact with the rash or the liquid from the blisters/rash, and
2. Through the air (i.e., when someone who has varicella coughs or sneezes in the same room as you and you inhale the infected droplets in the air).

People will typically begin to experience symptoms 10 to 21 days after they have been exposed to the virus. Persons with varicella **can infect others from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears** up until **all the blisters have scabbed over**.



Pregnant persons who become infected with varicella can pass the virus along to their unborn baby. This can lead to the baby being born with low birth weight, eye or limb abnormalities, skin scarring, or brain damage.

Who is at risk?

Varicella is most common in children and is typically mild in this age group. However, it is still possible for children to become severely ill due to varicella infection, and the risk for severe infection increases with age. Adolescents and adults are more likely than children to experience severe varicella infection.



People at particular risk for developing severe varicella infection include:

1. Newborns of mothers or birth-givers who develop varicella within the timeframe of 5 days before until 48 hours after giving birth.
2. Premature infants born at less than 28 weeks of gestation.
3. Pregnant persons who do not have immunity against varicella (lab-confirmed or through immunization).
4. Persons with a weakened immune system (who are immunocompromised), such as people with uncontrolled HIV or who were hematopoietic stem cell transplant (HSCT) recipients.

Good to know!

Getting immunized against varicella (chickenpox) allows your body to produce protective proteins called antibodies that specifically protect against varicella infection. If you have ever had chickenpox after you were 12 months old, you probably have these antibodies in your body too. While pregnant, you pass on some of these antibodies to your baby. This means they get some short-term protection against varicella until they are old enough to be immunized against it.

Who should be immunized?

- Children according to the childhood immunization schedule in their province/territory.
- Adolescents (13 to 17 years of age) and adults (18 to 49 years of age) who **have not been** immunized against varicella, or who **do not have** laboratory-confirmed immunity against varicella.
- Anyone considering becoming pregnant who has not been immunized against varicella, or who does not have laboratory-confirmed immunity against varicella. This is because the varicella vaccine **cannot** be given during pregnancy.

Publicly funded immunization schedules for varicella may vary between provinces and territories.

While the varicella (chickenpox) vaccine is highly effective, it is still possible for some vaccinated people to get varicella. However, the infection is usually **milder** in people who received the vaccine, and they tend to develop **fewer blisters** and are usually sick for a **shorter amount of time**. The efficacy of 2 doses of varicella vaccine against severe disease is 100%.

Are you protected against varicella (chickenpox)?



Varicella vaccines are safe and the most effective way to protect against varicella infection.

Talk to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or public health office about getting the varicella vaccine for you or your child.

References

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