

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Chickenpox (Varicella)

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also called varicella, is caused by a very contagious virus. People with chickenpox get an itchy rash that looks like tiny blisters. The rash usually starts on the face, stomach, chest or back, and spreads to other parts of the body. A mild fever, tiredness, and slight body discomfort usually come with the rash. Anyone who hasn't had chickenpox already can get it, but it is most common among children under 15 years old. More than 90% of US adults have already had chickenpox.

A vaccine is available to prevent the disease. However, sometimes people who have had the vaccine will still get chickenpox (called 'breakthrough disease'). If vaccinated people do get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. They will have fewer spots, are less likely to have a fever, and will recover faster.

### Is chickenpox dangerous?

Yes, it can be. Before the vaccine became available in 1995 about 11,000 people were hospitalized for chickenpox each year in the US, and about 100 people died. Chickenpox can lead to severe skin infection, scars, pneumonia, brain damage and death. Serious complications (such as pneumonia) are rare, but are more common in newborns, pregnant women, people with weak immune systems, and adults in general. A person who has had chickenpox can also get a painful rash, called shingles (zoster), years later.

### How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing, or touching the rash. People with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1 – 2 days before symptoms start until all the lesions are crusted over (usually about 5 days). However, people with weak immune systems are contagious longer, usually as long as new blisters keep appearing. Symptoms usually appear about 10 – 21 days after exposure to the virus. Under state regulations, people with chickenpox must stay out of school and work until all their blisters have dried and crusted.

### Who gets chickenpox?

- Anyone who has never had chickenpox and has never been vaccinated. However, sometimes, even people that have been vaccinated will still get chickenpox if exposed, but the disease is usually much milder and goes away sooner.
- Babies younger than 12 months old, because they are too young to be vaccinated.

### How can you prevent chickenpox?

- Protect your children by having them vaccinated when they are 12-18 months old, or at any age after that if they have never had chickenpox. It is important to make sure children who have not had chickenpox get vaccinated before their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday due to an increased risk of complications after this age.
- Adolescents and adults who are not immune to chickenpox, particularly those who are health care workers or who live with someone who has a weakened immune system, should be vaccinated. Women who plan to have children and are not immune should also be vaccinated. Adolescents (aged 13 and older) and adults need two doses of varicella vaccine for protection.
- If a person receives chickenpox vaccine within 3 (and possibly up to 5) days of being in contact with someone with chickenpox, there is a good chance they won't get sick.
- Some people who have not had chickenpox disease or vaccine are at increased risk for complications (such as newborns, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems) if they are exposed to chickenpox. They should get a shot of antibodies to chickenpox, called varicella-zoster immune globulin (VZIG), (instead of vaccine) to lower their chances of severe complications like pneumonia. VZIG offers only short-term protection, so anyone who gets it will still need to be vaccinated as described above in order to have long-term protection against chickenpox.

- State regulations require certain groups to be vaccinated against chickenpox. Children attending licensed child care or preschool, and school-age children entering certain grades must show proof of either receiving varicella vaccine or having a reliable proof of immunity. A reliable proof of immunity is defined as 1) physician interpretation of parent/guardian description of chickenpox; 2) physician diagnosis of chickenpox; or 3) serologic (blood test) proof of immunity. Children in child care, preschool and grades K-12 will be required to show immunity by 2005.

## Should pregnant women worry about chickenpox?

Pregnant women who have already had chickenpox disease or the vaccine do not need to worry. However, women who are not immune, who get chickenpox while they are pregnant, are more likely than other adults to develop serious complications. The unborn baby can also be affected. Babies born to mothers with a current case of chickenpox can develop high fevers and other serious problems. Pregnant women who have been exposed to somebody with chickenpox should see a doctor **immediately**. Those who are not sure if they had chickenpox as a child can have a blood test to see if they are protected against the virus. If they are not protected, they may need to get a shot of VZIG to lower their chances of severe complications.

## Can you get chickenpox more than once?

Yes, but it is very uncommon. In most cases, once you have had chickenpox, you cannot get it again. However, the virus that causes chickenpox stays in your body the rest of your life. Years later it can give you a rash called shingles, which doctors call ‘herpes zoster’. The shingles rash looks like chickenpox, but it usually shows up on only one part of your body and does not spread. Unlike chickenpox, shingles is painful. Children sometimes get shingles, but it is more common among adults. Touching fluid from the shingles rash can spread the virus that causes chickenpox to people who are not immune.

## Is varicella vaccine safe?

Yes, it is safe for most people. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing problems like fever, mild rash, temporary pain or stiffness in the joints, and allergic reactions. More severe problems are very rare. About 70– 86% of people who get the vaccine are protected from chickenpox.

## Who should not get varicella vaccine?

- People who have serious allergies to gelatin, the drug neomycin, or a previous dose of the vaccine should not get the vaccine.
- Pregnant women should not get varicella vaccine until after they deliver their babies.
- People with cancer, HIV, or other problems that weaken the immune system should check with their doctor or nurse before being vaccinated.
- People who recently had a blood transfusion or were given other blood products (including VZIG) should ask their doctor when they can get chickenpox vaccine.
- People with high fevers should not be vaccinated until after the fever and other symptoms are gone.

## Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, or your local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government).
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Immunization Program (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888)-658-2850, or on the MDPH website at <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/>.

Northeast Regional Office	Tewksbury	(978) 851-7261
Central Regional Office	West Boylston	(508) 792-7880
Southeast Regional Office	Taunton	(508) 977-3709
Metro/Boston* Regional Office	Jamaica Plain	(617) 983-6860
Western Regional Office	Amherst	(413) 545-6600

\*Boston providers and residents may also call the Boston Public Health Commission at (617) 534-5611.

- **CDC National Immunization Information Hotline**

English: 1-800-232-2522 or Spanish: 1-800-232-0233 (Mon – Fri, 8am – 11pm)

TTY: 1-800-243-7889 (Mon – Fri, 10am – 10pm)