

# Chickenpox in Children

Chickenpox causes a rash and can make a child feel generally unwell. Treatment aims to ease symptoms until the illness goes. Full recovery is usual in children. Serious complications are rare.

## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the herpes varicella virus. (It is different to the herpes simplex virus that causes cold sores and genital herpes.) Most children have chickenpox at some stage. The immune system makes antibodies during the infection. These fight the virus and then provide lifelong immunity. Therefore, it is very rare to have more than one bout of chickenpox.

## How do you get chickenpox?

The virus travels in the air and is very infectious. A child with chickenpox is likely to pass it on to most classmates and household members who have not already had it. It takes 11-20 days to develop symptoms after catching the virus (the 'incubation period').

## What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

- **Fever (temperature), aches and headache** often start a day or so before a rash appears.
- **Rash.** Spots appear in crops. They develop into small blisters and are itchy. They can be anywhere on the body, and sometimes in the mouth. Several crops may develop over several days. Some children may be covered in spots, others have only a few or even none.
- **Dry cough and sore throat** are common.

Some children feel quite unwell for a few days. Others appear only mildly ill. Most are much better within a week. The blisters dry up and scab. They gradually fade, but may take up to two weeks to go completely.

## What is the treatment for chickenpox?

Treatment aims to ease symptoms whilst the immune system fights the virus.

- **Give plenty to drink** to avoid dehydration.
- **Give paracetamol or ibuprofen** to ease fever, headaches, and aches and pains.
- **Calamine lotion or cream** put on the spots may ease itching.
- **Antihistamine tablets or liquid medicine** may help with sleep if itch is a problem. Give a dose at bedtime. You can buy these at pharmacies or get them on prescription.
- **Keep fingernails cut short** to stop deep scratching.

## Are there any complications?

- The spots do not usually scar unless they are badly scratched.
- Some spots become infected with bacteria in about 1 in 10 cases. If this occurs, the surrounding skin becomes red and sore. Antibiotics may then be needed.
- An ear infection develops in about 1 in 20 cases.

- Pneumonia and inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) are rare complications. See a doctor if your child develops any worrying symptoms such as:
  - breathing problems
  - drowsiness
  - convulsions
  - pains or headaches which become worse despite paracetamol or ibuprofen.

## **Protecting others**

Children with chickenpox are infectious from 2-4 days before, until 5 days after the rash starts. Keep children off school for 5 days after the rash starts. Also, when infectious, keep away from people who may get a severe illness if they get chickenpox. These are:

- Pregnant women who have not had chickenpox in the past. Chickenpox can be severe and cause complications during pregnancy.
- People with a poor immune system. For example, people with leukaemia, with HIV/AIDS, on high dose steroid medication, or are taking chemotherapy.

Healthy adults who have not had chickenpox may also want to avoid catching it as the illness tends to be worse in adults.

## **Should I let my child catch chickenpox?**

Some parents encourage their children to mix with others who have chickenpox in order to catch it.

### **Some arguments for this**

- Chickenpox is usually a milder illness in a child than in an adult.
- The risk of serious complications is higher in adults with chickenpox. In particular, chickenpox during pregnancy can cause serious complications to both mother and baby.
- Most people get chickenpox at some stage. As the risks are less if you have it as a child, it may be better to get it over with.

### **Some arguments against this**

- "I could not willingly let my child develop an illness."
- Although rare, some children do have serious complications.

Parents have different views on this issue.