

# Chicken Pox

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you or your child contract Chicken Pox. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional. Visiting your GP surgery, or a Hospital, or any public areas can put others at risk, so it is best to telephone NHS 111 or the surgery if you feel you need advice.

## Useful facts

- **What is Chicken Pox?** Chicken Pox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is very infectious and spreads in the air from person to person.
- **How common is it?** Most children have chickenpox at some stage. Most commonly, children get chickenpox before the age of 10. The immune system makes proteins called antibodies during the infection. These fight the virus and then provide lifelong protection against it (immunity). Therefore, it is uncommon to have more than one bout of chickenpox.
- **What is the incubation period?** It takes between 7 and 21 days (most commonly 10-14 days) to develop symptoms after catching the virus.
- **Protecting others** A person with chickenpox is infectious from two days before the spots first appear until they have all crusted over (commonly about five days after onset of the rash). Whilst infectious, keep away from at-risk people who may develop a severe illness if they get chickenpox. These include: Pregnant women, people with a poorly functioning immune system (for example, people with leukaemia, with HIV/AIDS, on steroid medication, or who are having chemotherapy), at-risk children (see later). Healthy adults who have not had chickenpox may also want to avoid catching it, as the illness tends to be worse in adults.
- **How dangerous is it?** Serious complications are rare but are more likely to occur in children with a poor immune system.

## What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Symptoms** Temperature (fever), aches and headache often start a day or so before a rash develops. Spots tend to appear in crops anywhere on the body. They start red, then develop into small blisters then scab over. They are usually itchy.
- ✓ **Duration** The 'incubation period' is 1 to 3 weeks (the time it takes from being exposed to chickenpox for the spots to start appearing). Some children feel quite unwell for a few days. Others appear only mildly ill. Most are much better within a week but the spots often take up to two weeks to fade completely. The spots do not usually scar unless they are badly scratched.

## What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

Treatment is mainly aimed at easing symptoms and trying to make your child as comfortable as possible whilst the immune system deals with the virus:

- ✓ **Dealing with a fever.** A fever commonly occurs with chickenpox, and may make your child feel uncomfortable and irritable. The following are things that you can do that may bring the temperature down and make your child feel more comfortable: Paracetamol (Ibuprofen is no longer recommended in chickenpox); remove extra layers of clothing; keep the room temperature normal. Tepid sponging is no longer advised.

*Continued overleaf*

- ✓ **Drink plenty** to avoid dehydration. If they are not keen to drink, it may help to give some paracetamol first as bringing their temperature down will make them less irritable. If they have spots in the mouth, paracetamol will reduce the pain there as well. Ice lollies can help!
- ✓ **Soothing cream** (emollient) may help the itch. Calamine lotion is the one most used, although it is not known how effective it is.
- ✓ **A sedating antihistamine** (in a tablet or liquid medicine) may help with sleep if itch is a problem. This can be used in children over 1 year old. Give a dose at bedtime. You can buy these at pharmacies or get them on prescription. Chlorphenamine (Piriton®) is the one most used.
- ✓ **Keep fingernails cut short** to stop deep scratching. Gloves or socks on hands at night may help too.
- ✓ **Dress children comfortably** so they are not cold or overheated. Use cool smooth fabrics such as cotton.

## When should I seek medical help?

Seek advice from your GP if any of the following warning symptoms /conditions are present:

- **Drowsiness or weakness** Any child who is generally becoming more unwell, particularly if they are drowsy or weak (wobbly on their feet)
- **Breathing problems**
- **Fits** (convulsions)
- **Headache** which becomes worse despite paracetamol
- **Severe rash** particularly if it bruises or bleeds into the skin (haemorrhagic rash).
- **Not drinking** due to a severe rash in the mouth
- **Bacterial infection** Spots can become infected with germs (bacteria) particularly if they have been scratched a lot. This is the most common complication in children. If this occurs, the surrounding skin becomes red and sore. Antibiotics in the form of creams or medicine may then be needed.
- **At risk groups** extra treatment such as aciclovir (an antiviral medicine) or vaccination may be recommended for the following groups if they have been in contact with or have developed chickenpox: Children (babies) less than 1 month old; Children with a poor immune system (for example, children with leukaemia, immune diseases or HIV/AIDS); Children taking certain medication such as steroids, immune-suppressing medication or chemotherapy, Children with severe heart or lung disease, Children with severe skin conditions; Adults and teenagers, Pregnant women who have never had chickenpox.

## Where can I find out more?

Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms and advise on suitable treatments. See also <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chickenpox/>



111 is the NHS non-emergency number. It's fast, easy and free. Call 111 and speak to a highly trained adviser, supported by healthcare professionals. They will ask you a series of questions to assess your symptoms and immediately direct you to the best medical care for you.

NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.