

CHICKENPOX FACT SHEET

What is chickenpox?

- Chickenpox (varicella) is a common, preventable childhood infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus.
- In most cases, individuals only get chickenpox once.
- In adults the varicella-zoster virus causes shingles, a very painful illness.
- Chickenpox is very dangerous for people with immune system problems like leukemia, or for people who are taking drugs that weaken the immune system (such as steroids).

What are the symptoms?

- Chickenpox begins with a fever, cough, sore throat and general aches and pains.
- Within 1 – 2 days itchy red spots appear on the skin that develops into small fluid filled blisters.
- The number of fluid filled blisters can vary from a few to many.
- The blisters dry and form scabs in 4 or 5 days.

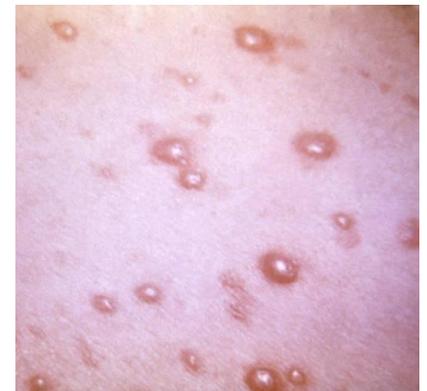


Photo Courtesy of CDC - Dr. K.L. Hermann

How is Chickenpox Spread?

- A camper with chickenpox is the most infectious 2 days before the rash appears.
- Chickenpox develops 2 – 3 weeks after contact with an infected person.
- Chickenpox spreads very easily through the air from coughing and sneezing or by directly touching the rash (blisters).
- The virus enters the body through the nose or mouth.
- The chickenpox virus does not live on objects like sheets, counters or toys.

How can chickenpox be treated?

- Creams and lotions can be used to stop the itching
- For fever, it is safe to use acetaminophen.
- **Do not give aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid or products that contain acetylsalicylic acid) to children or youth under the age of 19 years as aspirin has been linked to a serious illness called Reye Syndrome.**

Is there a vaccine against chickenpox?

- The chickenpox vaccine (Varilrix®, Varivax III®, Priorix-Tetra®) can prevent most people getting sick with chicken pox.

What if I have been exposed to chickenpox, and have never had it before, what can I do?

- Stay away from pregnant women, newborns and individuals with weak immune systems.
- The chickenpox vaccine can prevent chickenpox or severe infection if given within 3 – 5 days of being exposed to a person with chickenpox.
- Those individuals with immune system problems should consult their physician as soon as possible.

When can a camper return to camp?

The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that a camper/staff with **mild** chickenpox, who is able to participate normally in all activities, should be allowed to remain at camp even if they still have a rash. (As chickenpox is the most contagious 1 – 2 days prior to the rash appearing, it is usually too late to prevent exposure to other campers and staff.) Generally, most campers/staff with chickenpox are sick for 5 – 10 days and would feel more comfortable being at home during this period of time.

What should the Camp Director do?

- Contact the family to determine if they would be able to pick up their child to recover at home.
- In consultation with the health care staff, determine if any campers or staff have a weakened immune system or are taking steroids, and contact the camp doctor or the camper's family immediately.
- Communicate with all parents informing them that there has been a case of chickenpox at camp.
- Chickenpox is a reportable illness. Camps are required to contact their local public health department to report that a camper has chickenpox either that day or by the next working day. The Public Health Department will be able to provide you with additional information.

References:

Canadian Paediatric Society, www.caringforkids.cps.ca, Chickenpox Fact Sheet.

Toronto Public Health Department, Chickenpox Disease and Vaccine Information, September 2010.
www.toronto.ca/health

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