

**MONROE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
DISEASE CONTROL UNIT 274-6079**

**Chickenpox
(Varicella Zoster)**

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a highly communicable disease caused by the varicella virus, a member of the herpes virus family.

Who gets chickenpox?

Chickenpox is common in the United States. Almost everyone who is not vaccinated acquires chickenpox by adulthood.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is transmitted to others through direct person-to-person contact by droplet or airborne spread of discharges from an infected person's nose and throat or indirectly through articles freshly soiled by discharges from the infected person's lesions or mucous membranes. The scabs themselves are not considered infectious.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Initial symptoms may include sudden onset of fever (up to 102 F), and feeling tired and weak. An itchy blister-like rash soon follows these symptoms. The blisters eventually dry, crust over and form scabs. The blisters tend to be more common on covered than on exposed parts of the body. They may appear on the scalp, armpits, trunk and even on the eyelids and in the mouth. Mild infections occasionally occur in children. The disease is usually more serious in adults than in children.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms commonly appear 14-16 days after exposure, with a range of 10 - 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread chickenpox?

A person is able to transmit chickenpox from 1-2 days before onset of rash and continuing until all the lesions are crusted (usually about 5 days). Immunocompromised persons may be considered contagious for a longer period of time.

Does past infection with chickenpox make a person immune?

Chickenpox generally results in lifelong immunity. However, this infection may remain hidden and recur years later as herpes zoster (shingles) in a proportion of older adults and sometimes in children.

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What are the complications associated with chickenpox?

Newborn children (less than one month old) whose mothers are not immune, and patients with leukemia may suffer severe, prolonged or fatal chickenpox. Immunocompromised patients including those on immunosuppressive drugs may have an increased risk of developing a severe form of chickenpox or shingles. Chickenpox rarely may cause pneumonia or encephalitis (infection of the brain). Secondary bacterial infections of the lesions may cause infection in the blood and muscles and leave disfiguring scars. Reye Syndrome, a potentially serious complication associated with clinical chickenpox, may develop in those children who have been treated with aspirin products. Aspirin or aspirin products should never be given to a child with chickenpox.

Is there a vaccine for chickenpox?

A vaccine to prevent chickenpox is available for people greater than one year of age. The New York State Department of Health recommends routine vaccination at 12 to 18 months of age. The vaccine is required for entry into any school for children born after 1/1/2000. For children born after 1/1/1998 the vaccine is required for enrollment into kindergarten, elementary, intermediate or secondary school and children born on or after 1/1/1994 beginning with their enrollment into 6th Grade.

**To protect high-risk newborns and immunocompromised patients from exposure, a shot of varicella-zoster immune globulin (VZIG) is effective in modifying or preventing disease if given within 96 hours after exposure to a case of chickenpox

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of chickenpox?

- The best method to prevent further spread of chickenpox is for persons infected with the disease to remain home.
- Avoid exposing others who are susceptible.
- If they develop symptoms, they should remain home until one week after the skin eruption began or until the lesions become dry.
- Particular attention should be given toward avoiding unnecessary exposure of nonimmune newborns, pregnant women and immunocompromised patients to chickenpox.