

Chickenpox

You haven't been feeling so great for the last few days, and you've had a runny nose and a cough. Then one morning you wake up and stumble into the bathroom. You look in the mirror with blurry eyes and — yikes! You have chickenpox!

What Is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by a virus called varicella zoster. People who get the virus often develop a rash of spots that look like blisters all over their bodies. The blisters are small and sit on an area of red skin that can be anywhere from the size of a pencil eraser to the size of a dime.

You've probably heard that chickenpox are itchy. It's true. The illness also may come along with a runny nose and cough. But the good news is that chickenpox is a common illness for kids, and most get better by resting just like you do with a cold or the flu.

And the really good news is that, thanks to the chickenpox vaccine, lots of kids don't get chickenpox at all. Kids who do get it after they've gotten the shot often get less severe cases, which means they get better quicker.

What Happens When You Have Chickenpox?

Chickenpox may start out seeming like a cold: You might have a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, and a cough. But 1 to 2 days later, the rash begins, often in bunches of spots on the chest and face. From there it can spread out quickly over the entire body — sometimes the rash is even in a person's ears and mouth.

The number of pox is different for everyone. Some people get just a few bumps; others are covered from head to toe. At first, the rash looks like pinkish dots that quickly develop a small blister on top (a blister is a bump on your skin that fills up with fluid). After about 24 to 48 hours, the fluid in the blisters gets cloudy and the blisters begin to crust over.

Chickenpox blisters show up in waves, so after some begin to crust over, a new group of spots might appear. New chickenpox usually stop appearing by the seventh day, though they may stop as early as the third day. It usually takes 10–14 days for all the blisters to be scabbed over and then you are no longer contagious.

Besides the rash, someone with chickenpox might also have a stomachache, a fever, and may just not feel well.

How Does Chickenpox Spread?

Chickenpox is contagious, meaning that someone who has it can easily spread it to someone else. Someone who has chickenpox is most contagious during the first 2 to 5 days of being sick. That's usually about 1 to 2 days before the rash shows up. So you could be spreading around chickenpox without even knowing it!

A person who has chickenpox can pass it to someone else by coughing or sneezing. When he or she coughs, sneezes, laughs, and even talks, tiny drops come out of the mouth and nose. These drops are full of the chickenpox virus. It's easy for others to breathe in these

drops or get them on their hands. Before you know it, the chickenpox virus has infected someone new.

Itchy-Itchy, Scratchy-Scratchy

If you are that unlucky person, how do you keep your chickenpox from driving you crazy? They itch, but you're not supposed to scratch them.

These tips can help you feel less itchy:

- Keep cool because heat and sweat will make you itch more. You might want to put a cool, wet washcloth on the really bad areas.
- Trim your fingernails, so if you do scratch, you won't tear your skin.
- Soak in a cool bath. Adding some oatmeal to your bath water can help relieve the itching.

Don't Scratch

Scratching the blisters can tear your skin and leave scars. Scratching also can let germs in, and the blisters could get infected. If your fever goes higher and an area of your skin gets really red, warm, and painful, tell an adult right away. You'll need to see a doctor because you could have a skin infection.

While you have the chickenpox, a pain reliever like acetaminophen might help you feel better, but let your parents help you with this.

Do **not** take aspirin because it can cause a rare but serious illness in kids called Reye syndrome. Medicines and creams that may stop the itch can also be helpful.

It doesn't usually happen, but let your parents know if you feel especially bad. Sometimes, chickenpox leads to other, more serious illnesses.

Most kids don't have any major problems and get better in a week or two. And when **all** the blisters have scabs, you're not contagious anymore and you can go back to school! In a few days, the scabs will fall off. And once you've had chickenpox, it's unlikely you'll ever get it again.

Get a Shot, Avoid the Dots!

Not long ago, 3 million people got chickenpox each year in the United States. But now that kids receive the shot, fewer and fewer people get chickenpox.

Have you had the chickenpox vaccine? You might not remember because it's often given at age 1. But you can get it when you're older, too. Ask your mom or dad if you've had yours. You'll be glad that you did if chickenpox starts making its way around your school!

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