

Chickenpox (Varicella) & Shingles – Frequently Asked Questions

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also known as varicella, is a common, vaccine-preventable disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox causes a fever and an itchy, blister-like rash.

The rash begins as many small red bumps that look like pimples or insect bites. They appear in waves over three to seven days and then develop into thin-walled blisters filled with fluid. The rash usually appears on the chest, back or stomach, before spreading to other parts of the body. The rash may be very itchy.

People who have had one dose of a chickenpox-containing vaccine may still get the virus, but they generally experience milder symptoms than those who have not received any doses.

Symptoms of chickenpox can begin 10 to 21 days after a person has been exposed to the virus. If you've been exposed to chickenpox, please look for signs and/or symptoms. Contact your healthcare provider or public health if symptoms develop. Please notify your healthcare provider that you have been in contact with someone who has chickenpox.

How does chickenpox spread and am I at risk of getting chickenpox?

The virus spreads easily through the air when an infected person coughs and/or sneezes.

Someone with chickenpox can spread the virus to others for one to two days before they get the rash and until all their blisters have turned into scabs.

You are considered at risk of developing chickenpox if:

- You have no history of a chickenpox infection, or
- You have had only one or no doses of a varicella (chickenpox) containing vaccine.

When can I or my child return to work/school after having chickenpox?

People who contract chickenpox may return to work or school and/or resume normal activities when they are fever-free and well enough to participate in all activities.

Different rules may apply to susceptible healthcare workers; they should consult their occupational health department if exposed to chickenpox.

A healthier future for all.

How can I protect myself and my family from chickenpox?

The best way to protect yourself and your family from chickenpox is by receiving the chickenpox vaccine.

The vaccine is usually given in two doses, with the first dose occurring at or after one year of age. Most children receive a second dose when they begin school (age 4-6). Children less than a year old are generally considered protected by maternal antibodies.

In periods of increased illness, receiving a second vaccine dose can help prevent infection and further spread of chickenpox in the community. For young children, this includes receiving a second dose sooner than usual. The second dose can be received at any time, as long as both doses are received at least four weeks apart.

Most people born before 2010 have received only one dose of a varicella-containing vaccine. People under 50 years of age may benefit from receiving a second dose if they are at risk of exposure and have not previously had chickenpox. If you cannot remember if you have had chickenpox, or how many doses of the vaccine you have had, it is generally safe to receive an additional dose to help protect from infection if you may potentially be exposed.

If you have already had two doses of a chickenpox-containing vaccine, it's not necessary to receive additional booster doses.

Varicella vaccination should not be given to pregnant individuals.

I'm pregnant, am I at risk of getting chickenpox?

Chickenpox can cause serious complications for pregnant people who have never been vaccinated against chickenpox or who have never had a chickenpox infection in the past. If you are currently pregnant and may have been in contact with someone who has chickenpox, please consult with your physician as soon as possible or call Grey Bruce Public Health at 519-376-9420 option 6.

Those who are not immune to chickenpox may be recommended a medication to prevent severe disease. This medication must be taken within a short time period after exposure to the chickenpox virus to be effective. The chickenpox-containing vaccine should not be given to people who are pregnant. Please contact Grey Bruce Public Health at 519-376-9420 option 6 if you have any further questions.

What if I'm breastfeeding, can I receive a chickenpox vaccine?

If you have recently given birth and are breastfeeding, but are unsure of your immune status, you should consider receiving a dose of the chickenpox vaccine. This is safe to receive while breastfeeding and can help to protect both you and your baby.

What is shingles?

Shingles is a painful rash illness. It occurs when the varicella-zoster virus reactivates in the body of someone who has previously had chickenpox. It is more common for this to happen later in life.

You cannot get shingles from someone else, including from people with active chickenpox or shingles infections. **You can only get shingles if you had chickenpox earlier in your life.**

If you have shingles, you can give someone chickenpox by transmitting the varicella-zoster virus to them. The virus can spread through direct contact with the shingles rash blisters or by breathing in virus particles from the rash. **People with shingles are generally less contagious than someone with chickenpox.**

If you think you have shingles, you should speak with a healthcare provider. Treatment may be warranted to reduce the length and severity of symptoms. These medications work best when they are started as early as possible after the rash appears.

Who can get the shingles vaccine?

A shingles vaccine is available to individuals who are 65 to 70 years of age to help prevent or lessen infection.

This is available in a two-dose series with a minimum of 8 weeks between doses.

Contact information:

Infectious Diseases Team

Grey Bruce Public Health

Phone: 519-376-9420 option 6

Fax: 519-376-4152

Email: infectiousdiseases@publichealthgreybruce.on.ca