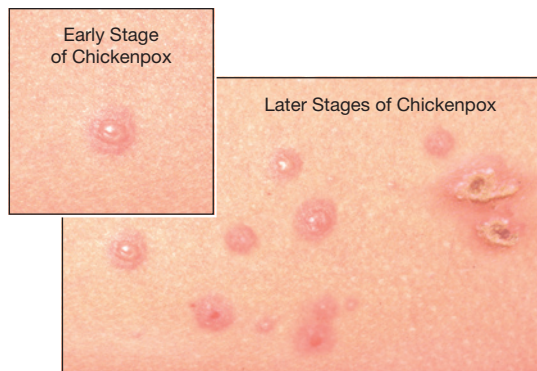


# Chickenpox

**C**hickenpox is a highly contagious and common childhood disease caused by a virus in the **herpes** family of viruses called the **varicella virus**. The varicella virus can remain in the body for decades and become active again, usually in adults, causing **herpes zoster** (shingles). Shingles involves the occurrence of painful skin sores along the distribution of nerves across the trunk or face. The August 17, 2005, issue of *JAMA* includes an article reporting that use of the varicella vaccine to prevent chickenpox has greatly reduced medical expenses related to chickenpox. This Patient Page is based on one published in the February 18, 2004, issue of *JAMA*.

## SYMPTOMS

- Itchy blisters on a red base, progressing to scabs, appear along with newer blisters, mainly on the trunk, face, and scalp and last 5 to 10 days
- Fever
- Headache



## SOURCES OF CHICKENPOX INFECTION

- Direct contact with skin sores or breathing in the varicella virus by being around someone with chickenpox who is coughing or sneezing
- A person with chickenpox can spread the virus for 1 to 2 days before the rash appears and until all the blisters have formed scabs

## TREATMENT

- Oatmeal baths can help relieve itching.
- Acetaminophen can be used to treat fever.
- Do not use aspirin to treat symptoms associated with chickenpox. Giving aspirin to someone with chickenpox can cause **Reye syndrome**—a severe disease (that can cause death) affecting the liver and brain.
- **Acyclovir** (a prescription medication used to treat viral infections) may be recommended for people at risk for developing serious complications.
- **Varicella zoster immune globulin** can be given after exposure to chickenpox to reduce its severity in people who are at risk for serious complications.

## COMPLICATIONS

- Scratching blisters can cause them to become infected.
- The varicella virus can cause viral pneumonia and encephalitis (infection of the brain).
- Chickenpox can sometimes be fatal, particularly when it occurs in adults or persons with impaired immunity.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Dermatology, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—National Immunization Program

## PREVENTION

- Chickenpox can be prevented by the varicella vaccine.
- Because even healthy people can have serious complications from chickenpox, vaccination is highly recommended.
- Children should get vaccinated at 12 to 18 months of age.
- Older children who have not had chickenpox should also be vaccinated.
- Individuals who should not get the varicella vaccine include children with leukemia or other cancers, people whose immune systems may be weakened due to disease or medications, people taking high doses of steroid medications, pregnant women, and infants younger than 1 year.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Academy of Pediatrics  
847/434-4000  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—National Immunization Program  
800/232-4636  
[www.cdc.gov/nip/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nip/default.htm)

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