



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control Division
1010 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, MA 02118
Phone: 617-534-5611 Fax: 617-534-5905

Chickenpox

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (also called varicella) is caused by a very contagious virus called varicella-zoster.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

At first those with chickenpox become tired, have body aches and a slight fever. An itchy rash with tiny blisters soon appears on the face, stomach, chest or back, and spreads to other parts of the body. These blisters will eventually dry, crust over and form scabs. There are usually more blisters on the chest and back than on the face arms or legs.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person by direct contact with the blisters or through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People with chickenpox can spread the disease from 1-2 days before symptoms start until all the blisters are crusted over (usually about 5 days). However, people with weak immune systems are often contagious longer. Under Massachusetts regulations, people with chickenpox must stay out of school and work until all their blisters have dried and crusted.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

Symptoms usually appear 10 to 21 days after exposure to the virus.

Is chickenpox dangerous?

Serious complications are rare, but chickenpox can lead to severe skin infection, scars, pneumonia, and brain damage. Serious complications are usually more common in newborns, pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems, and adults. In a person who has had chickenpox, the virus can become active years later causing a painful rash called shingles.

Who gets chickenpox?

- Anyone who has not had chickenpox or has not been vaccinated against chickenpox can get the illness. It is most common among children under 15 years old.
- Babies younger than 12 months old are also at risk because they are too young to be vaccinated.

How can you prevent chickenpox?

- Protect your children by having them vaccinated when they are 12-18 months old, or at any age after that if they have never had chickenpox. A second dose of vaccine is now recommended at 4-6 years of age.
- Adolescents and adults who are not immune to chickenpox, particularly those who are health care workers or who live with someone who has a weakened immune system should be vaccinated.
- Women who plan to have children and are not immune should also be vaccinated at least 1 month prior to becoming pregnant or post-partum.
- Being vaccinated before any exposure to chickenpox offers the best protection. However vaccination given within three to five days after an exposure may also provide some protection.
- Some unvaccinated and non-immune people (such as newborns, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems) should see their health care provider immediately (within 96 hours) if they are exposed to someone with chickenpox because

they may be given a shot called varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG) that can provide some short-term protection.

- Massachusetts regulations require certain groups to be vaccinated against chickenpox. Health care providers, children attending licensed day care or preschool and children entering kindergarten must show proof of immunity before entry.

- **Proof of immunity**

- Written documentation of appropriate vaccination

Children 12 months to 5 years	1 dose of vaccine required
Children 5 years to 13 years	1 dose of vaccine required 2 nd dose of vaccine recommended
Children 13 years and above (adults)	2 doses of vaccine required

- Born in the United States before 1980 (*this is not considered proof of immunity for healthcare providers or pregnant women),
- Written documentation of a blood test confirming chickenpox disease or immunity,
- Written documentation of history of shingles (Herpes zoster) by healthcare provider ,
- Written documentation of chickenpox diagnosed by a healthcare provider or healthcare provider verification of chickenpox disease,
 - Healthcare providers should provide the following for mild or atypical cases,
 - A link to another person with a typical case of chickenpox, or
 - A blood test confirming the person had chickenpox
- *Persons born outside the United States before 1980 are **NOT** considered immune (*persons in this group must have appropriate vaccine)*

Should pregnant women worry about chickenpox?

Pregnant women who have already had chickenpox disease or vaccine against chickenpox are immune. Women who get chickenpox while they are pregnant are more likely than other adults to develop serious complications. Babies born to mothers with active chickenpox can develop high fevers and other serious problems. Pregnant women who have not had chickenpox and are exposed to somebody with chickenpox should see a doctor **immediately**. Those who are not sure if they had chickenpox as a child can have a blood test to see if they are protected against the virus.

Can you get chickenpox more than once?

Yes, but it is very uncommon. Chickenpox generally results in lifelong immunity and most people will not get it again. However, the virus that causes chickenpox stays in your body for the rest of your life. Years later it can give you a painful rash called shingles (Herpes zoster). The shingles rash looks like chickenpox, but it usually shows up on only one part of the body and does not spread. Children sometimes get shingles, but it is more common among adults. Touching fluid from the shingles rash can spread the virus to people who are not immune.

Is varicella vaccine safe?

Yes, it is safe for most people. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing problems like fever, mild rash, temporary pain at the injection site and allergic reactions. More severe problems are very rare. About 80–90% of people who get the vaccine are protected from chickenpox. If vaccinated people do get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. They have a rash with fewer spots, lower fevers, and get better faster, yet they can still spread chickenpox to others who are not immune.

Who should not get varicella vaccine?

- People who have serious allergies to gelatin or the drug neomycin should not receive the varicella vaccine.
- People who have had a serious adverse reaction to a previous dose of varicella vaccine should not receive the varicella vaccine again.
- Pregnant women or women attempting to become pregnant should not get varicella vaccine until after delivery.
- People with cancer, HIV, or other problems that weaken the immune system should check with their doctor or nurse before being vaccinated.
- People who recently had a blood transfusion or were given other blood products should ask their doctor when they may get chickenpox vaccine since these products can temporarily reduce the effectiveness of the vaccine.
- People with moderate or severe illnesses should not be vaccinated until after the fever and other symptoms are gone.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
(617) 534-5611 or www.bphc.org**