

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** (say: var-uh-seh-luh zas-tur). 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 people get better by just resting like you do with a cold or the flu. And the really good news is that, thanks to the chickenpox vaccine (say: vak-seen), lots of kids don't get chickenpox at all. Kids who do get it, if they got 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 may appear. New chickenpox usually stop appearing by the seventh day, though they may stop as early as the third day. After about a week, all the blisters should get scabs on them and start to heal. 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 (say: kon-tay-jus), 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 that he or she is 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 someone else to breathe in these drops or get them on his or her hands. Before you know it, the chickenpox virus has infected someone new.

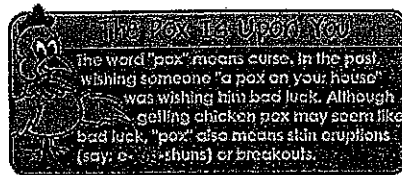
Itchy Itchy, Scratchy Scratchy

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. Scratching the blisters can tear your skin and leave scars. Scratching can also let germs in, and the blisters could get infected.

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, they won't tear your skin.
- Soak in a lukewarm bath. Adding some oatmeal (yes, oatmeal!) to your bath water can help relieve the itching.
- Have your mom or dad help you apply calamine lotion, which soothes itching.

A pain reliever like acetaminophen (say: uh-see-tuh-mih-nuh-fun) 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 (say: rye sin-drome). 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. Or one of your blisters could get infected.

Usually, you won't have any major problems and you'll get better in about a week. 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!