

# Chickenpox

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## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a disease caused by the varicella zoster virus. It causes a rash and fever and can be serious, especially for babies, adolescents, adults, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems. The chickenpox vaccine protects against this disease.

## What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Chickenpox causes a rash of itchy blisters. It starts on the face, chest, back, and stomach. A person can have 250 to 500 blisters. The rash can spread over the whole body, including inside the mouth, eyelids or genital area. Chickenpox also causes fever, headache, and tiredness. People are usually sick for 5 to 10 days.

You can still get chickenpox if you have been vaccinated against the disease. But, it is usually milder with less than 50 blisters and little or no fever.

## How serious is chickenpox?

Most children with chickenpox completely recover in a week. But, the itching can be very uncomfortable. Children with chickenpox miss several days of school or child care.

The disease can also cause serious problems, including:

- Bacterial infection of the skin and tissues under the skin (including group A streptococcal infections)
- Dehydration (loss of body fluids) from vomiting or diarrhea
- Pneumonia (lung infection)
- Encephalitis (brain swelling)

Some people may need hospital care. Chickenpox can even be deadly.

## How does chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox spreads easily through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also spread by touching fluid from blisters.

## Benefits of the chickenpox vaccine

- Saves lives.
- Protects against serious disease.
- Prevents discomfort from disease.

## Side effects of the chickenpox vaccine

The most common side effects are usually mild and include the following:

- Sore arm from the shot in 1 out of 5 children and 1 out of 3 adolescents and adults
- Mild rash, up to 1 month after vaccination in 1 out of 25 people.

Serious side effects are very rare but can include the following:

- Seizures (jerking or staring) because of fever.
- Pneumonia (lung infection).

Children with chickenpox usually must miss school or child care for several days of school to avoid spreading the virus to others.

If a person vaccinated for chickenpox gets the disease, they can still spread it to others.

## What is the chickenpox vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine protects against chickenpox. It is made from weakened varicella virus that protects children by preparing their bodies to fight the virus.

Some vaccinated people still get chickenpox, but they usually have a very mild case. Most have fewer blisters and little or no fever. They get well quickly. The vaccine prevents almost all cases of severe disease.



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## When should my child get the chickenpox vaccine?

Children need two doses of the chickenpox vaccine at the following ages for best protection:

- The first dose at 12 through 15 months; and
- A second dose at 4 through 6 years.

## Why should my child get the chickenpox vaccine?

The chickenpox vaccine protects against an uncomfortable and sometimes serious disease.

Before the chickenpox vaccine, about 11,000 people in the U.S. needed hospital care each year for chickenpox, and about 100 people died each year of chickenpox.

## Is the chickenpox vaccine safe?

The chickenpox vaccine is very safe, and it is effective at preventing chickenpox. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. Most people who get the chickenpox vaccine have no side effects. Side effects that do occur are almost always mild, such as pain from the shot or fever. Serious side effects are very rare.

## If my child does not get the chickenpox vaccine, will he get the disease?

Before there was a vaccine, almost everyone got chickenpox. It was one of the most common childhood diseases.

With the vaccine, cases of chickenpox have dropped by about 90%. But if parents don't vaccinate their children, cases could go up again.

## Why not let children get chickenpox naturally?

Chickenpox can be a fairly mild disease, but it isn't always. There's no way to know who will have a mild case and who will be very sick.

## What is the MMRV vaccine?

The MMRV vaccine combines the MMR (for measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine with the chickenpox vaccine. It was created to reduce the number of shots children get.

Children who get the first dose of MMRV vaccine at 12 to 23 months old may have a higher chance of a seizure caused by fever. But, this is not common. These seizures may be scary for parents, but they are not harmful to children.

## What can I do to protect my child from chickenpox?

- ✓ Vaccinate your child on time.
- ✓ Talk with your child's doctor if you have questions.
- ✓ Keep a record of your child's vaccinations to make sure your child is up-to-date.

CDC recommends that children younger than 4 get the first dose of MMR and chickenpox vaccines separately.

## Where can I learn more about the chickenpox vaccine?

To learn more about the chickenpox vaccine or other vaccines, talk to your child's doctor.

Call **800-CDC-INFO** (800-232-4636) or go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines> and check out the following resources:

- Parent's Guide to Childhood Immunization—Varicella (Chickenpox): <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/parents-guide/default.htm>
- Infant Immunizations FAQs: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/parent-questions.html>
- Vaccines website for parents: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents>

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, and American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend all children receive the chickenpox vaccine according to the recommended schedule.