

Chickenpox (varicella)

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Symptoms start with a fever, headache or tiredness. This is followed by a characteristic spotty, itchy rash of small, fluid-filled blisters, which quickly spreads all over the body. Chickenpox is usually a mild disease in children, but complications occur in around 1% of cases.

How it spreads

Chickenpox is very infectious and can spread quickly in childcare environments. It spreads through the air (airborne droplets) or by touching blisters on someone who is infected with chickenpox.

Vaccination against chickenpox is part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule in the Australian National Immunisation Program.

Exclusion period

Exclude until all blisters have dried – this is usually at least 5 days after the rash first appeared in unvaccinated children, and less in vaccinated children.

Contacts: any child who is immunocompromised is at high risk of developing severe disease if exposed. Talk to the parents about the child's potential risk and exposure and follow the child's agreed action plan.

Risks in pregnancy

If you are pregnant and get chickenpox, it can cause serious problems for your baby. The type of problems depends on how far along your pregnancy is. The risk is highest in the first 3 months of pregnancy.

If you have not had a chickenpox vaccination and are not sure if you have had chickenpox before, see a doctor within 4 days of hearing you have been exposed to check if you are immune. If you are not immune, you can get an antibody injection. Vaccination for chickenpox during pregnancy is not recommended. Read more about chickenpox and pregnancy at pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/chickenpox-and-pregnancy.

Actions for educators and other staff

Follow the exclusion periods in the *Staying healthy* guidelines. Let pregnant staff know if there is a chickenpox case in the service and recommend they seek medical advice. Encourage staff to be vaccinated.

Ensure staff and children have good respiratory and hand hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Actions for parents and carers

If your child has chickenpox, keep them at home until all blisters have dried. Wash your hands often, and keep your child away from family and friends until they feel well again. The best way to protect yourself and other children against chickenpox is to get vaccinated.

More information about chickenpox (varicella)

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of chickenpox (healthdirect.gov.au/chickenpox).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.