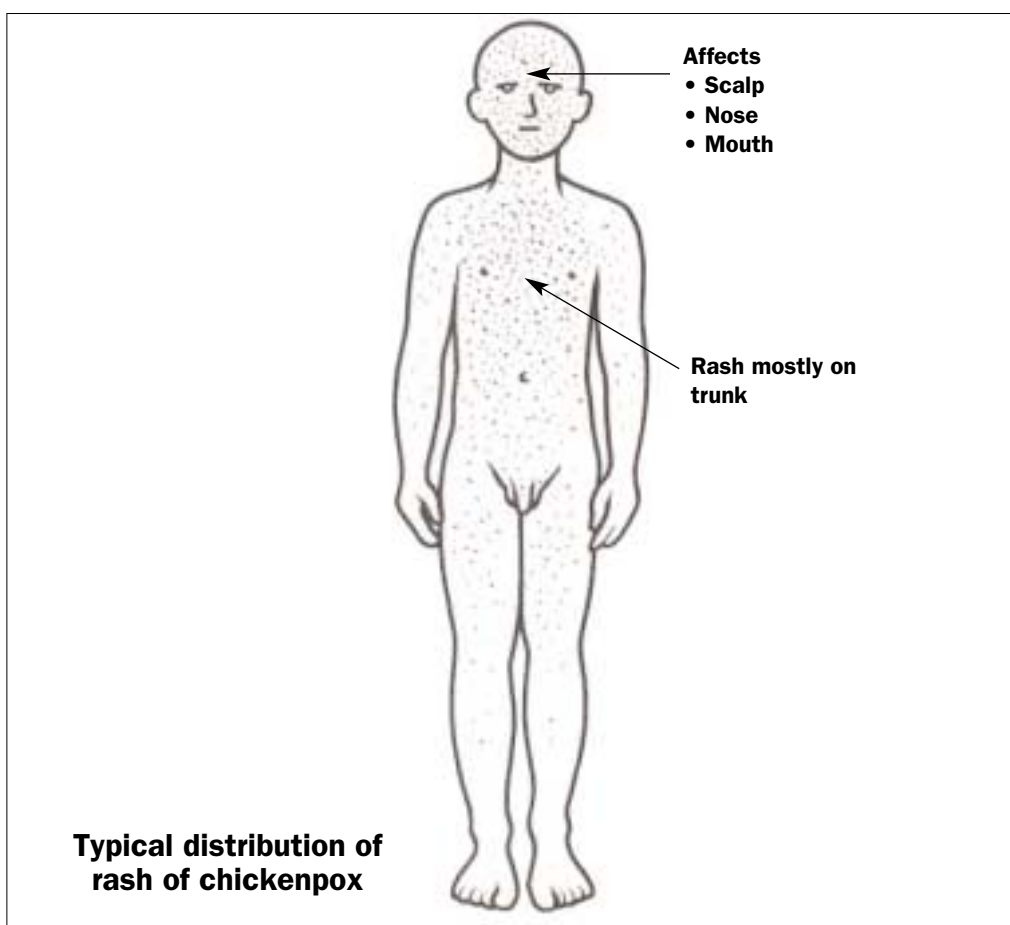


# Chickenpox (varicella)



## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox (varicella) is a very contagious, usually mild disease that is caused by the same virus which causes shingles (herpes zoster).

It can affect all ages, but is most common in children younger than 10. It can be a very severe illness in adults.

## What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Children are usually not very sick, but are lethargic and have a mild fever.

Adults have a flu-like illness and are usually quite sick with a fever lasting 3-5 days.

The main feature is an itchy rash that starts as small, red, pimple-like lumps, which come out in crops for 3-4 days. Within a few hours they form blisters which look like droplets of water.

The blisters burst within 24 hours and leave open sores which then crust over and become dry.

The itchiness can vary from being mild to very intense. The rash is concentrated on the trunk and head, but then spreads to anywhere on the body, especially the arms and legs. The rash can appear in or on the mouth, eyes, scalp, nose and genitalia.

## How do you catch chickenpox?

The varicella-zoster virus is very infectious and is spread easily from one person to another by droplets travelling through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

It can also be spread by direct contact with the fluid from the raw sores.

Patients are infectious for 1-2 days before the rash erupts and remain so until the final sores have crusted over.

The incubation period is about 10-21 days (average 14-16 days) so the infection appears about two weeks after exposure to an infected person.

After recovery, lifelong immunity can be expected.

## What are the risks?

Chickenpox is usually a mild infection with complete recovery. However, rare complications such as pneumonia and brain damage can occur.

Infection of the blisters can occur and may cause scarring, however, this is not usually a problem.

## What is the treatment?

- The patient should rest until feeling well.
- Give paracetamol for the fever (avoid aspirin in children).

- Daub a soothing anti-itch lotion, such as calamine.
- Avoid scratching — clean and cut fingernails of children and put on cotton gloves if necessary.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Daily bathing is advisable, with Pinetarsol or sodium bicarbonate (half a cup to the bath water). Pat dry with a clean, soft towel; do not rub.
- Antihistamines are sometimes used if itch is severe.
- Antiviral drugs: These are usually reserved for adolescents and adults with a severe illness, and should be started during the first three days of the rash (preferably day one). In general they are not used in the very young and in those who are not ill or have very few spots.
- Exclusion rules: Patients are infectious and should be excluded from school, child care or work for seven days or until the last sore is covered by a scab. Take care to avoid contact with people with an immune deficiency.

## How is it prevented?

A vaccine against chickenpox is now available. Ask your doctor for information.

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