

Western Washington University
STUDENT HEALTH CENTER
High Street Hall 25
(360) 650-3400

VARICELLA **(Chickenpox)**

Chickenpox is caused by initial infection with the varicella-zoster (VZ) virus and associated with fever and a rash. The rash is composed of small water blisters, each appearing like a dewdrop surrounded by a rosey pink halo. They may be located anywhere on the skin, scalp or mucous membranes (mouth, throat, vagina). Chickenpox can occur at any age but is seen most often in children younger than ten years old. It is estimated that *3 million* cases of chickenpox occur each year.

VZ virus spreads through the air from the skin rash or throat of the person who is ill with either chickenpox or shingles. Once the virus is breathed in, illness begins about 2 weeks later (range, 10-21 days). Exposed persons who have already had the disease rarely catch it again, although second attacks do occur. These are usually mild and most likely to develop in children who first had chickenpox before they were 1 year old.

Symptoms

Some patients feel ill 24 hours before the rash breaks out. The rash begins as tiny red bumps that look like insect bites. These progress over 24 hours into clear and then cloudy blisters which dry up and form crusts (scabs). The average person develops 250-500 such lesions. The rash itches intensely. Most patients have a fever, occasionally as high as 104 F (40 C). Generally, the more lesions present, the higher the fever. Poor appetite is common. A mild sore throat and swelling of the lymph nodes of the neck may occur. As the last blisters scab over, the fever will fall and you should begin to feel better. Illness usually lasts from 5-7 days. Adults or any persons with an underlying chronic disease may experience more severe symptoms. These persons occasionally develop pneumonia or central nervous system involvement.

Once a person catches chickenpox, s/he carries VZ virus for life in certain nerve cells. It can reappear in later years as shingles (herpes zoster), a painful blistering rash which occurs in a narrow band on one side of the body. Shingles usually develops in elderly people but occasionally occurs in children or young adults. A **SECOND EXPOSURE TO VZ VIRUS DOES NOT CAUSE SHINGLES**. Shingles occurs as a result of the *virus reactivating from a persons own nerve cell*. This usually occurs in concurrence with stress or another illness.

When to Contact a Physician

You should contact a physician (at the Student Health Center, your private physician, or at the Emergency Room) if you feel frightened or worried about your illness. You should contact a physician immediately if you develop any of the following:

1. vomiting for more than 4 hours
2. extreme sleepiness
3. difficulty walking
4. severe cough, shortness of breath or chest pain
5. severe stomach ache or headache
6. fever over 104 F (40 C)
7. a rapidly spreading area of swelling or redness

You should contact a physician within 24 hours if you notice any of the following:

1. fever for more than 1 week
2. new blisters after 7 days
3. redness, swelling or pain over the area of the rash

Treatment

There is no specific medicine recommended for chickenpox which occurs in an otherwise healthy patient. However, there are a lot of things you can do to help relieve the symptoms. Relief of itching is important as it will curb scratching. Scratching chickenpox lesions may result in infection and may worsen scarring.

Lukewarm baths containing oatmeal (Aveeno colloidal) or baking soda (1/2 cup) are both soothing and cleansing. Applying a topical lotion (calamine or Benadryl) relieves itching.

Antihistamines, such as Benadryl, taken by mouth will reduce itching but will probably make you sleepy.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol, Tempra, etc.) can be used to reduce fevers. Aspirin should NOT be taken by patients with chickenpox as the combination may lead to a life-threatening illness called Reye's syndrome.

Antibiotics are not effective against chickenpox.

Contagion

Chickenpox is one of the most contagious of all diseases. Persons with chickenpox are infectious for 2 days before the rash appears and remain so until all the blisters have dried up. Once aware of your diagnosis, you should not go out in public (including classes) until all blisters have scabs on them.

Chickenpox can be fatal in persons with poor resistance, such as those with cancer, on chemotherapy or receiving steroids (e.g. prednisone). If you know of such a person who has been exposed to you, please discuss this matter with your doctor right away. If your roommates have not had chickenpox, they have a 70-90% chance of developing the disease.