



Chickenpox and Shingles

Living Well factsheet – Work Health and Safety Directorate

Chickenpox is a common viral infection that can reappear later in life as shingles.

What is chickenpox and shingles?

Chickenpox and shingles (varicella-zoster) are a highly contagious virus and a member of the herpes family. The disease is usually mild in children but can be more severe in adults and can cause serious illness.

The adult form which most commonly occurs is shingles. Complications can include meningitis and pneumonia. In rare cases it can involve the joints and other organs.

Signs and symptoms

For chickenpox:

- Mild fever
- Runny nose
- Fatigue
- General rash.

For shingles:

- Painful skin eruptions that generally appear on 1 side of the body.

How is the virus spread?

Shingles is spread by direct contact with an infected person. Chickenpox is spread by coughing and direct contact with an infected person. Children are usually infectious 2 days before the rash appears.

What is the risk of transmission?

People rarely get chickenpox twice, whilst shingles occurs more commonly in aged people and individuals that are immunosuppressed.

Shingles is a reactivation of a previous chickenpox infection. Most people have had chickenpox as children and are therefore at greater risk of contracting shingles as adults.

What precautions can you take to avoid the virus?

- Practice good personal hygiene by covering the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- Disposing of soiled tissues
- Washing hands carefully
- Not sharing eating utensils, food or drinking cups
- Pregnant women should avoid contact with anyone with chickenpox.

How is chickenpox and shingles prevented?

- Childhood vaccination programs
- People with chickenpox should avoid contact with others and not attend work, school or childcare until 5 days after the onset of the rash when all blisters have crusted.

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Further Information

Contact your general practitioner

NSW Department of Health

See Infection Control

Information in this fact sheet has been sourced from the NSW Department of Health.