

Patient & Visitor Fact Sheet

Chickenpox

(Varicella Zoster Virus)

WHAT IS CHICKENPOX?

Chickenpox is a highly contagious viral illness that is caused by the varicella zoster virus (also known as herpes zoster virus). Chickenpox illness begins with a sudden onset of flu like symptoms such as: fever, a runny nose, tiredness, generally feeling unwell and then a rash. The rash usually appears on the chest, abdomen and back first, but may begin on any part of the body and then spread over the rest of the body: including the face, arms, legs, scalp, inside the mouth and respiratory tract and in the eyes.

The chickenpox rash consists of individual fluid filled blister like spots. It is very itchy and will continue to appear on the body over 3 to 4 days. Chickenpox is more common in children, but also occurs in non-immune adults who often have a more severe illness and suffer more complications than children.

Complications from chickenpox include:

- infected skin lesions,
- dehydration from associated vomiting or diarrhoea,
- exacerbation of asthma
- Complications such as pneumonia.

People with chickenpox are usually considered infectious from 1 to 2 days before the onset of the rash (although this may be as long as 5 days in some people). Because the fluid in the spots contain the virus people with chickenpox remain infectious until ALL of the spots have crusted over and dried, usually another 5 days.

HOW DID I ACQUIRE CHICKENPOX?

You may have been unknowingly in contact with an infectious person, who may have sneezed or coughed on you or you may have had contact with a contaminated item. If you have been caring for a person with chickenpox and are not immune to or vaccinated for chickenpox it is very easy for you to catch this virus.

WHO IS AT RISK FROM CHICKENPOX INFECTION?

The high risk groups for chickenpox infection include:

- People who have not previously had chickenpox or have not been vaccinated for chickenpox
- Pregnant women
- Newborn babies who are too young to receive the vaccination and non-vaccinated children
- Anyone with a low immunity

People who have had chickenpox in the past, or been vaccinated for chickenpox rarely get it a second time, however it is possible to have a repeat infection.

HOW IS CHICKENPOX SPREAD?

Chickenpox is highly contagious and spreads from person to person by direct contact with the spots and with the fluid in them. The virus particles are very small and are also expelled into the air, from an infected person's coughing, sneezing and breathing. The virus remains suspended in the air and people can become infected unknowingly. After contact with a person infected with chicken pox it takes between 10-21 days (called an incubation period) for the chickenpox illness to develop.

HOW WILL MY CARE CHANGE WHILST IN HOSPITAL?

- A sign is placed outside your door to alert hospital staff for the need to use special protective infection control precautions. This sign also alerts visitors of the need to speak with nursing staff prior to entering your room.

- The hospital staff will wear protective clothing such as a face mask, gloves and an apron or gown when they enter your room.
- You will be allocated a private room with your own en-suite facilities, the door to your room must be kept closed at all times to prevent the spread of the virus into the rest of the ward.
- To prevent further spread of the infection you are required to remain in your room during the infectious stage.
- If you are required to have urgent medical tests elsewhere in the hospital you will be supplied with a special face mask to wear over your nose and mouth when you are outside your room.

GOOD HAND HYGIENE PRACTICES

Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent **ALL** infections. Encourage your family and friends to maintain good hand hygiene practices every day. Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection prevention and control team

Alternative - Alcohol based hand rub / gel

During your stay in hospital you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled / dirty. There are a variety of brands on the market and are available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

CAN I STILL HAVE VISITORS?

Visitors who **SHOULD NOT** come to see you are those who **HAVE NOT** had or been vaccinated against chickenpox, especially children, new born babies, anyone who may have a lowered immunity or is pregnant. If you are unsure about having contact with your family and friends during your infectious stage, please speak to your doctor or ask to speak with the infection control nurse. Whilst you are infectious, your visitors will be asked to wear a mask to protect them from infection; they may also be required to wear gloves and an apron if they are assisting you with care. The nursing staff will direct your visitors in applying these items and in the correct disposal of them as well as educate them on the need to perform hand hygiene before entering your room and when they leave your room. We would appreciate it if you would also encourage your visitors to wear a mask and perform this hand hygiene.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I GO HOME?

- When you return home it is important for you, your family and your friends to continue the good hand hygiene practices that you have been taught in hospital every day.
- Children with chickenpox should be kept home and excluded from school and childcare centres until they are no longer infectious. Adults should stay home from work.
- All people with chickenpox should avoid mixing with other people until they are over their infectious stage.
- If you need to attend a hospital emergency department or your GP notify the receptionist of your infectious status on arrival, ask the receptionist to supply you with a face mask and sit away from other people.

WHERE CAN I GET FURTHER INFORMATION?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Control Department ask your nurse to contact us. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our Extension numbers are: 9433 or 9731

Alternatively please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055

REFERENCES

NSW Dept. of Health, Infection Control Policy, PD 2007_036

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Factsheets/Chickenpox.pdf>