



Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella virus. It cannot be treated with antibiotics. Treatment is usually only needed to help with fever or pain (e.g. paracetamol) and for the rash (e.g. calamine lotion).

Chickenpox is easily spread by direct contact with a person who has chickenpox, or by fluid droplets in the air when they cough or sneeze. A person with chickenpox is infectious to others from one to two days before the rash first appears until the last blisters have dried up.

In rare cases, children can develop serious complications as a result of chickenpox.

Signs and symptoms of chickenpox

If your child has chickenpox, they may:

- have a mild fever
- feel tired and irritable
- be itchy
- have a rash

The rash usually appears 10 to 21 days after first being exposed to someone who has chickenpox. The time between exposure and getting the rash is called the incubation period. The rash usually first appears on the chest, back or face and head. It can then move to other areas of the body, including inside the mouth. At first, the rash looks like small pimples. These later become blisters full of fluid. Most children with chickenpox are unwell for about five to seven days.

Top tip:

Chickenpox is one of the only rashes that gives spots on the scalp.

Please contact your GP your child's own hospital doctor if they are on medicine that affects their immune system (immunosuppressive medication e.g., chemotherapy, high dose steroids) or are under a month old, they may need treatment straight away Stage 1:

Small spots appear



Image of spots on white skin in first stage



Image of spots in stage 1 on dark brown skin



Image of spots in stage 1 on medium brown skin

Stage 2: the spots become blisters.



Image of spots in stage 2 on dark brown skin



Image of spots in stage 2 on light brown skin



Image of spots in stage 2 on medium brown skin



Image of spots in stage 2 on white skin

Stage 3: the blisters become scabs



Image of spots in stage 3 on medium brown skin



Image of stage 3 spots on light brown skin



Image of spots in stage 3 on white skin

Care at home

Children with chickenpox can usually be cared for at home and do not need to see a doctor.

Because chickenpox is a virus, it cannot be treated with antibiotics. Treatment is about controlling the itching from the rash and other symptoms related to the viral illness. There are many medications and creams that you can buy from your local pharmacy to help with the itching.

It can be difficult to make sure children drink enough when they are unwell. To prevent dehydration, give your child sips of drinks (water is best), jelly, ice lollies, soup and other fluids often.

Children with chickenpox may have a fever and can feel tired and irritable. Taking paracetamol can help, but do not give your child aspirin or ibuprofen. See our fact sheets pain relief for children and fever in children.

When to see a doctor

You should take your child to see a GP if:

- they get large, sore, red areas around the rash, which may indicate a secondary bacterial infection.

How is chickenpox spread?

Children and adults can get chickenpox, but it is more common in children. Chickenpox is highly contagious, which means it is very easy to catch. It can be spread by having direct contact with the person who has chickenpox, especially by touching the liquid from the blisters. Chickenpox is also spread by the fluids that are coughed or sneezed into the air.



If your child has chickenpox, they are infectious to others from one to two days before the rash first appears up until the last blisters have dried up. Some members of the family may need to stay away from the child during this infectious stage. Anyone taking long-term oral steroids or who is immunocompromised (has a weakened immune system e.g., due to chemotherapy), pregnant women or babies under three months should see a GP if they could have been exposed to chickenpox, as they may need treatment to prevent the virus.

Children with chickenpox should not go to child care, kindergarten or school until the last blister has dried, (see our should my child go to school page). A dry blister scab is not infectious. You should tell the school if your child gets chickenpox, as there may be other children who need to be immunised or treated.

Key points to remember:

- Chickenpox is very easy to catch and is infectious for one to two days before the rash starts up until the last blister has dried.
- The rash usually starts between 10 to 21 days after the first exposure to chickenpox.
- Antibiotics will not cure chickenpox.
- Common questions our doctors are asked.
- Will my child's chickenpox blisters scar?

Chickenpox sometimes causes pockmark scars on the skin. Regular chicken pox blisters do not scar, but if they are scratched or become infected, they are more likely to leave permanent marks on the skin.

How can I stop my child scratching their rash?

There are many medications and creams that you can buy from your local pharmacy to help with the itching – ask your pharmacist for advice. Young children and babies might need to wear mittens to help prevent them from scratching.

What can I do about the blisters inside my child's mouth?

Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do to help the blisters. Try giving your child paracetamol or ibuprofen to relieve the pain. If your child is in so much pain from mouth blisters that they are not drinking, they will need to be admitted to hospital to prevent dehydration.

What are the serious complications of chickenpox?

One in 5000 people who catch chickenpox will develop a brain inflammation called encephalitis, and three in 100,000 will die. These complications are very rare, and most children make a full recovery.

Can my child be immunised against chickenpox?

You can get the chickenpox vaccine on the NHS if there's a risk of harming someone with a weakened immune system if you spread the virus to them. For example, a child can be vaccinated if 1 of their parents is having chemotherapy.

You can also pay for the vaccine at some private clinics or travel clinics. It costs between £120 and £200.