

Chickenpox in Adults

Chickenpox causes a rash and can make you feel generally unwell. Symptoms tend to be worse in adults than children. Treatment aims to ease symptoms until the illness goes. Full recovery is usual. Serious complications are rare, but are more common in adults than children and are more likely to occur in people with a poor immune system such as those on chemotherapy.

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. The immune system makes antibodies during the infection. These fight the virus and then provide lifelong immunity. Therefore, it is rare to have more than one bout of chickenpox.

Most people have chickenpox as a child. About 9 in 10 people have had it by the age of 15. It is uncommon for adults to have chickenpox.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Symptoms are usually more severe in adults than in children. You can expect to have a few uncomfortable days.

- **Fever (temperature), aches and headache** often start a day or so before a rash appears.
- **Rash.** Spots appear in crops. The spots develop into small blisters and are itchy. They can be anywhere on the body and sometimes also in the mouth. Several crops may develop over several days. Some people are covered in spots, others have only a few.
- **Dry cough, sore throat, and feeling sick** are common.

The fever and generally feeling unwell can last several days. The blisters gradually dry up and scab. They slowly fade over a week or so, but may take 2-3 weeks to go completely. A dry cough may persist for a while after all the other symptoms have gone.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

Treatment aims to ease symptoms whilst your immune system fights the virus.

- **Have plenty to drink** to avoid dehydration.
- **Take paracetamol or ibuprofen** to ease fever, headaches, and aches and pains.
- **Crotamiton lotion or cream** put on the spots may ease itching.
- **Antihistamine tablets or liquid medicine** taken at bedtime may help you to sleep if itch is a problem at night. You can buy these at pharmacies, or get them on prescription.

Antiviral medication is used in special circumstances where chickenpox can be more serious. For example, people who have a poor immune system, newborn babies, and in some cases of chickenpox in pregnant women.

Are there any complications?

- The spots do not usually scar unless they are badly scratched.
- In some cases, some spots become infected with bacteria. If this occurs the surrounding skin becomes red and sore. Antibiotics may then be needed.
- Inflammation of the lung (pneumonia) is a rare complication affecting about 1 in 100 adults with chickenpox.
- Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) is a very rare complication.

See a doctor urgently if you become breathless, confused, or if you have any unusual or severe symptoms. Also, pregnant women have a higher risk of developing complications. See a doctor urgently if you are pregnant and develop chickenpox.

Is chickenpox infectious?

Yes, it is very infectious. The virus travels in the air and then settles on clothes, bedding, etc. It takes 11-20 days to develop symptoms after catching the virus (the 'incubation period').

Protecting others

A person with chickenpox is infectious from 2-4 days before the rash first appears until all the spots have crusted over (commonly about 5-6 days after onset of the illness). You can usually return to work after this time if you feel well enough. Whilst you are infectious, keep away from people who may get a severe illness if they get chickenpox. These are:

- Pregnant women who have not had chickenpox in the past.
- People with a poor immune system. For example, people with leukaemia, with HIV/AIDS, on high dose steroid medication, or are taking chemotherapy.

Healthy people who have not had chickenpox may also want to avoid catching it. So, friends and family who have not had chickenpox may wish avoid you whilst you are infectious. However, most healthy adults and many children have already had chickenpox, and so are immune.

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