

Chickenpox and Shingles Information Leaflet for Patients and Visitors



Chickenpox And Shingles

Chickenpox is an acute, infectious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus and is most commonly seen in children under 10 years old. This virus, if re-activated in a person who has had chickenpox previously, can also cause shingles (herpes zoster).

Shingles tends to be more prevalent in adults. It is not possible to develop shingles from exposure to a person with chickenpox. It is possible however to develop chickenpox as a result of exposure to a person with shingles.

Is Shingles the same as Chickenpox?

The same virus causes these illnesses. Once you have had chickenpox the virus never leaves your body, instead it rests in your nerves. If you become run down (e.g. by other illnesses, pregnancy, stress) the virus may wake up again. This second stage is called shingles. Shingles may be very painful or cause no discomfort, just a rash of blisters often on the back, buttocks, under breasts, around the eye.

Transmission

Chickenpox is highly contagious, infecting up to 90% of people who come into contact with the disease. Transmission is through direct person to person contact, airborne droplet infection or through contact with infected articles such as clothing and bedding.

The incubation period (time from becoming infected to when symptoms first appear) is from 10 to 21 days.

The most infectious period is from 1 to 2 days before the rash appears but infectivity continues until all the lesions have crusted over (commonly about 5 to 6 days after onset of illness).

Symptoms of Chickenpox

Chickenpox may initially begin with cold-like symptoms followed by a high temperature and an intensely itchy, vesicular (fluid-filled, blister-like) rash. Clusters of vesicular spots appear over 3 to 5 days, mostly over the trunk and more sparsely over the limbs.

The severity of infection varies and it is possible to be infected but show no symptoms.

Can you catch Chickenpox twice?

It is very, very rare to catch chickenpox twice. Once you have chickenpox once you can assume that you will never catch chicken pox again.

So if you have definitely had chickenpox before, it is safe to care for children with chickenpox or visit people with chickenpox. You are immune and cannot carry it to other people (providing you wash your hands after the visit).

Pregnant women are advised to avoid contact with people with chickenpox even if they have had chickenpox before. Sometimes mistakes are made when diagnosing chickenpox and the pregnant woman may have in the past been told she has had chickenpox when in fact the rash was not chickenpox and therefore no immunity to chickenpox exists. Her baby could be at risk if she developed this infection.

If you have never had chickenpox or are unsure, then you should not visit someone with chickenpox (even for a few minutes). If you have visited by mistake you could show signs of chickenpox 10-21 days after your visit. If you are still well after this time it is very unlikely that you will get chickenpox. If you get chickenpox you will have been infectious to others from the 8-10th day after your visit..

How long am I Infectious for if I have Chickenpox?

People with chickenpox are likely to be infectious 3 days prior to the rash appearing up until the rash has dried up and scabbed over.

Advice for Pregnant Women

Pregnant women who have been in contact with shingles and have no history of chickenpox should contact their GP promptly for advice.

It is worth remembering that 90% of adults in the UK are immune to chickenpox, many of these people will have had mild infection and may not even know they have had chickenpox.

What precautions will they take if I have Chickenpox while in hospital?

To reduce the risk of others catching chickenpox you will be cared for in a side room with the door closed. Staff will wear disposable gloves and aprons when in your room. This protective clothing will be removed on leaving the room and hands will be washed before caring for another patient. Only immune staff will care for you (the gloves and aprons are an extra precaution to stop the infected fluid in your spots from reaching non-immune patients). Masks are not recommended as the chickenpox virus is small and will pass straight through the mask.

How can you catch Shingles?

You do not catch shingles; the virus is already present in your body after you had chickenpox. Shingles often occurs when you are run down and vulnerable but not as result of coming into contact with someone with chickenpox.

You can not catch shingles from shingles. However the shingles blisters contain fluid carrying the Chickenpox virus.

If someone who has not had chickenpox touches the rash they risk getting chickenpox. If you know you have not had chickenpox or are unsure, avoid hugging or touching someone with a shingles rash. Shingles is not passed through the air. Care should be taken to avoid contact with the shingles fluid on linen/personal clothes. Clothes and other linen should be washed in a washing machine to remove the virus.

Treatment for Chickenpox and Shingles

There is no specific treatment for Chickenpox and Shingles. It is a viral infection which will not respond to antibiotics. Treatment should be based on reducing symptoms such as fever and itchiness. People at higher risk of developing serious complications may be given antiviral drugs such as Acyclovir. These cannot kill the virus but they can help to stop it multiplying. Antiviral medicine may help to reduce the severity, particularly if taken in the early stages of the condition.

Can Shingles come back?

If you become run down again shingles can reoccur.

How long am I infectious for if I have Shingles?

Until the rash is dry and has scabbed over.

For further information please contact the Infection Prevention and Control Department:

**Lister Hospital Tel: 01438
314333 on Ext 5383 or Bleep
5383**

www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk

You can request this information in a different format or another language.

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