

CHICKENPOX AND SHINGLES

What Is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is usually a disease of children, but it can occur at any age. The characteristic sign is an itchy rash, especially on the trunk, face and upper limbs. The rash starts as pink spots and progresses to small fluid filled spots with a red base which are easily ruptured. Children usually have a few other symptoms, but adults are often more ill with fever, headache, backache and shivers.

What Causes Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by a virus called the varicella-zoster virus.

What Is Shingles?

Shingles is also caused by the varicella-zoster virus. In some people it lives silently in the body after an attack of chickenpox, often for many years, before re-appearing and causing a skin rash limited to one area of the body. Shingles can cause considerable pain.

How Is The Virus Spread?

The commonest method of spread is by coughs and sneezes from a chickenpox sufferer. It is possible to transmit the virus by contact with the skin rash in chickenpox or shingles, but this is not common.

Are Chickenpox And Shingles Serious Diseases?

These diseases usually cause few problems for healthy children and adults. They can cause very serious problems for sick children and adults, especially those who are suffering from leukaemia and cancer. If you develop chickenpox or shingles you must keep away from seriously ill people. In recent years drugs have been developed to treat shingles and there are two situations in which healthy staff members would be considered for drug treatment:-

- Shingles affecting the eye;
- Sufferers over the age of 55 years (in these patients the use of drugs has been shown to reduce the risk of pain).

In these situations you should consult your General Practitioner at once.

I Have Never Had Chickenpox And There Is A Patient On The Ward Where I Work Who Has Developed It. I Was In Contact With This Patient Yesterday. What Should I Do?

Report to the Occupational Health Service at the earliest opportunity. A blood test will confirm whether you are immune or not. If you are not and you have been exposed to the virus which causes the disease, you may have to stay away from patients or from work until we can be sure you have not developed the disease.

How Long Will I Stay Infectious If I Am Diagnosed With Chickenpox Or Shingles?

You are infectious until the fluid filled spots are completely dry and there is no flaky skin.

I Am Pregnant – Should I Worry?

Again, you should report to the Occupational Health Service at once. If you are not immune the Consultant Virologist will advise you if you should have an injection called immunoglobulin.

If I Am Not Immune Is There A Vaccine I Can Have?

Yes. If you consider you may require this please discuss this with your General Practitioner or your Occupational Health doctor or nurse.

