

Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a contagious disease caused by Varicella-Zoster virus. If you think you have chickenpox, *do not* go to the UHS Medical Center Office, Strong Memorial Hospital, or anywhere in the Medical Center. Chickenpox could be a life-threatening illness for many hospitalized patients and others with compromised immune systems. When you call UHS to schedule an appointment with your primary care provider, please let the receptionist know that you think you might have chickenpox. She will schedule your appointment at the River Campus office or the Eastman School of Music Office (ESM students only).

TRANSMISSION

The virus is transmitted from person to person through airborne routes, such as coughing and by direct contact with skin lesions. Transmission can occur a few days before the onset of the rash and during the rash from the fluid contained in the skin blisters before they have dried and crusted. A pregnant woman who contracts the disease can transmit the virus to her fetus. Chickenpox cannot be transmitted by contact with dry surfaces (e.g., handrails, door knobs.)

SUSCEPTIBILITY

Chickenpox occurs in both sexes and all races equally. Most cases (90%) occur in children 1 to 14 years of age. After the illness most people have life long immunity (resistance to developing chickenpox again). Mild cases during childhood may have been undetected but can still provide immunity. Under certain conditions a blood test can be ordered to determine whether someone has immunity or is susceptible (i.e., will develop disease after exposure).

If you are immunocompromised (i.e., taking prescribed steroids, are HIV positive, or have certain cancers or other illnesses) and contract chickenpox, you may be at increased risk for developing complications. Contact your UHS primary care provider for more information.

DURATION

It takes approximately 10 to 21 days after exposure (incubation period) before symptoms appear. The illness can start with several days of chills, fever, and muscle and joint aches. Usually no cough or intestinal symptoms occur. The rash (which may be the first manifestation) usually starts as a few spots on the trunk and scalp. New lesions occur daily over the next 2-4 days, spreading onto the arms and legs. You are contagious for about two days before the pox rash appears and until the rash has completely crusted over.

The itching skin eruptions characteristic of chickenpox go through a progression of stages. The skin eruptions usually begin as a spotty rash, which soon develop into raised pimples, followed by teardrop fluid-filled blisters, which crust over to form a scab. Blisters can occur in the mouth or on the eyes. A red base surrounds these lesions.

Several of these stages will be present at the same time. The progression of stages from rash to scab usually takes about four to seven days, with the overall illness lasting 7-14 days.

DIAGNOSIS

Chickenpox is usually diagnosed from the classic rash and the medical history of the patient. Blood tests, and tests of the pox themselves, can confirm the diagnosis if there is any question.

TREATMENT

Treatment consists of using lotions, such as Calamine Lotion, to decrease the itch. Occasionally, anti-itch medicines, like Benadryl®, are taken orally as needed. When diagnosed within 24 hours, your health care provider, to help shorten the course of the illness, may prescribe a prescription medication or Ibuprofen. Any acetaminophen product (e.g., Tylenol®) may be taken every 4-6 hours as needed. Antibiotics are not effective against the chickenpox virus. **Aspirin should be avoided.**

It is important to try not to scratch the lesions. Frequent bathing in tepid water or colloidal oatmeal is soothing and helps prevent skin infections. Bed rest and plenty of fluids are important.

PROTECTING OTHERS

- It is important to try to limit the spread of chickenpox, especially to susceptible high-risk people such as pregnant women, newborns, and immunocompromised persons.
- You should not use public transportation (e.g., bus, plane, train). If you are able to go home by personal transportation, you may do so. If you do not have personal transportation home, we ask you to remain in your residence hall room, leaving only to use the bathroom.
- Roommates or friends will be able to obtain food for you from the dining halls by using a meal voucher and your ID.
- Only those who have already had chickenpox should deliver food to a sick student's room.
- You may leave your room and return to classes when all the lesions are dried and crusted.

The staff at the UHS River Campus Office will help determine when you can return to activities.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of services. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

To learn more about Chickenpox, you can visit:

Medline PLUS: Chickenpox
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/>

National Immunization Program
<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/diseases/varicella/>

Mckinley Health Center
<http://www.mckinley.uiuc.edu/health-info/>