

# Facts About Chickenpox and Shingles for Adults

## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also known as varicella, is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. It is spread easily through the air by infected people when they sneeze or cough. The disease also spreads through contact with an infected person's chickenpox blisters. People who have never had chickenpox can get infected just by being in a room with someone who has the disease.

## Symptoms of chickenpox

Early symptoms may include achiness, fever, fatigue, irritability and sore throat. A rash then appears and develops into as many as 250-500 itchy blisters over the entire body, that usually last for 5-7 days and heal with scabs. The rash may even spread into the mouth or other internal parts of the body. The illness is usually not severe, but the risk of hospitalization and death is increased among adolescents and adults. Symptoms appear between 10 and 21 days after exposure to the varicella-zoster virus. Persons who were vaccinated against chickenpox may sometimes develop chickenpox disease but the presentation is usually mild, with approximately 50 or fewer red bumps that rarely evolve to blisters.

## What is shingles?

Shingles, or zoster, is a common illness that may strike 1 in 5 people in the United States. It is caused by a reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus years or even decades after illness with chickenpox. Shingles is associated with normal aging and with anything that weakens the immune system such as certain medications, cancers, or infections, but it can also occur in healthy children and younger persons.

## Symptoms of shingles

A painful, blistering rash tends to occur on one side of the body, usually on the trunk or face. There may be pain, numbness or tingling of the area 2-4 days before the rash appears. Pain or numbness usually resolves within weeks, but it can sometimes persist for much longer. Damage can occur to the eyes or other organs if they are involved.

## Prevention

There is a vaccine to protect against chickenpox. Children 12 months to 12 years should receive one dose of the vaccine, and two doses are recommended for people 13 years or older. A vaccine against shingles was tested in clinical trials and ~~newly formulated VZV (shingles) vaccine~~ may be available in the future to prevent the development and/or lessen the severity of shingles.

## Who should get chickenpox vaccine?

**The chickenpox vaccine is recommended for susceptible children and adults. Among persons aged 13 years of age or older, particular focus should be placed on certain groups of adolescents and adults who have not received the vaccine and have not already had chickenpox and are at a higher risk for severe disease or exposure/transmission:**

- ◆ Healthcare workers.
- ◆ College students.
- ◆ Household contacts of immunocompromised persons.
- ◆ Residents and staff in institutional settings.
- ◆ Inmates and staff of correctional institutions.
- ◆ International travelers.
- ◆ Military personnel.
- ◆ Nonpregnant women of childbearing age.
- ◆ Teachers and day care workers.
- ◆ Non-immune persons who have been exposed to chickenpox may receive varicella vaccine within 3 days (72 hours) to 5 days (120 hours) of the exposure to prevent or diminish the severity of illness.

# Facts About Chickenpox and Shingles for Adults

- FACT:** Chickenpox (varicella) can be prevented with a vaccine. Sometimes vaccinated persons come down with chickenpox after vaccination but the illness is usually mild with < 50 lesions.
- FACT:** Chickenpox is contagious from 1 to 2 days before the appearance of rash until all blisters have formed scabs.
- FACT:** Following exposure to an infectious person, it usually takes 10 to 21 days before the symptoms of chickenpox begin to appear.
- FACT:** Adults are more likely than children to die from chickenpox and have serious complications resulting from varicella infection. Currently, less than 5% of adults are susceptible to infection with the chickenpox virus; younger adults are more likely to be susceptible.
- FACT:** Immunocompromised people are more likely to have serious illness with complications as a result of chickenpox. The best way to prevent infection in such people is by immunizing their susceptible family members and their other close contacts.
- FACT:** If a pregnant woman gets varicella during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy, her baby has a 1 in a 100 chance of having serious birth defects such as shortening and scarring of limbs, cataracts, small head size, abnormal development of the brain and and mental retardation
- FACT:** There are an estimated 750,000 to 1 million cases of shingles diagnosed annually in the U.S.
- FACT:** Shingles, typically affects people over 50 years of age and those whose immune systems have been weakened by HIV infection, cancers, or treatment with immunosuppressive drugs.

## Vaccine Safety

Research has shown chickenpox vaccine to be 70-90% effective in preventing disease and 95% effective in preventing severe disease. Varicella vaccine is also very safe. The most common side effects are mild and may include pain and redness at the injection site. A mild rash may develop. As with any medicine, there are very small risks that serious problems could occur after getting the vaccine. However, the potential risks associated with varicella disease are much greater than the potential risks associated with the varicella vaccine.