



CHICKEN POX AND SHINGLES

WHAT IS CHICKEN POX?

- Chickenpox (also called Varicella) is a viral illness caused by the herpes zoster virus, also known as the Varicella-Zoster virus.
- Chickenpox usually causes mild illness in children but may reappear later in life as Shingles.
- Chickenpox in adults and people with weakened immune systems can cause severe illness.
- Infection during pregnancy can cause birth defects, skin scarring, and other complications for the baby.
- There is vaccination available on the National Immunisation Program that is given to children at 18 months of age.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CHICKEN POX?

- Chickenpox starts with sudden onset of low-grade fever, runny nose, feeling unwell and a skin rash.
- The rash appears over three to four days and begins as small lumps that turn into blisters and then scab over after about five days.
- Symptoms can present within two weeks after exposure to the virus.
- Most people recover without complications, but sometimes infection can cause serious complications, such as pneumonia and inflammation of the brain.
- Infection is rarely fatal.
- People that have been previously vaccinated can still get chickenpox however symptoms tend to be milder and less contagious than in unvaccinated people.

HOW IS CHICKEN POX SPREAD?

- Early in the illness, the virus is spread by breathing in droplets that are expelled by infected person by coughing or sneezing.
- Later in the illness, the virus is spread to other people by direct contact with the fluid in the blisters. Blisters that have scabbed do not spread infection.
- The infection is highly contagious to people who have never had chickenpox or who have not been vaccinated.
- People are infectious from 1 - 2 days before the rash appears (during the runny nose phase) and up to five days after (when the blisters have formed crusts or scabs).
- Chickenpox infection triggers an immune response and people rarely get chickenpox twice.

WHO IS AT RISK OF SEVERE ILLNESS FROM CHICKEN POX?

- Anyone who has not had chickenpox or has not been vaccinated in the past. People with a history of chickenpox are likely to be immune to the virus.
- The incidence and severity of shingles increases with age.

CHICKENPOX VACCINATION

- Chickenpox can be prevented by vaccination.
- Children (<14 years) in Australia are recommended to receive two doses of varicella vaccine, with the first dose given at 18 months of age.
- This first dose of chickenpox vaccine is funded under the National Immunisation Program and is given as part of a combination vaccine called MMRV, which contains the second dose of the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine.
- Chickenpox vaccination is also recommended for adolescents (>14 years) and adults who have never been vaccinated or have not had chickenpox in the past.



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- Vaccination involves two doses at least 1 month apart.
- Vaccination is especially recommended for people at elevated risk, such as health care workers, people living with or working with small children, women planning a pregnancy, and household contact of persons who are immunosuppressed.

HOW IS CHICKEN POX PREVENTED?

- People with chickenpox should avoid others and not attend childcare or school until at least five days after onset of the rash and all the blisters have scabbed.
- People with chickenpox should cover the nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, dispose of soiled tissues, wash their hands well and not share eating utensils, food or drinking cups.
- Pregnant women should avoid anyone with chickenpox or shingles and should see their doctor if they have been around someone with these illnesses.

SHINGLES

WHAT IS SHINGLES?

- Shingles (also called Zoster) is a viral infection caused by the varicella zoster virus, which is the same virus that causes chickenpox.
- You can only get shingles if you have had chickenpox in the past.
- After you have had chickenpox, the varicella zoster virus stays in your nerve cells. The virus can remain dormant (inactive) for many years.
- If the virus becomes active again, it generally presents as shingles.
- It is rare for a person to have more than one episode of shingles in their lifetime.
- It is not possible to catch shingles from someone experiencing shingles, however the virus can cause chickenpox in people who are not immune to chickenpox when they come in direct contact with the skin rash of a person with shingles.
- Unlike chickenpox, the shingles virus is not airborne and cannot be spread by coughing and sneezing.
- The virus can be spread by direct contact with the skin rash of infected people causing chickenpox in people who are not immune.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SHINGLES?

- The shingles rash develops into painful blisters that may also be itchy, usually on one side of the body, either on the face, chest, back, abdomen or pelvis.
- They can take several weeks to settle.
- In 1 in 10 people, the pain and tingling of shingles can last for months or even years. This is called post-herpetic neuralgia.

WHO IS AT RISK OF SEVERE ILLNESS FROM SHINGLES?

- People over the age of 50 are most at risk.
- Shingles is a common health condition in older people, especially if you are over 80.
- Shingles is also more common in people with a weakened immune system resulting from other medical conditions.
- It may also be triggered by stressful events such as illness or grief.
- It is rare for children under 12 years of age to get shingles.



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HOW IS SHINGLES PREVENTED?

- The Nationals immunisation Program provides a free shingles vaccine, Shingrix® (2 dose course) to: people aged 65 years and older
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and older immunocompromised people aged 18 years and older with certain medical conditions:
- Two doses are required for maximum protection.
- If you are not eligible to receive the free vaccine, speak to your GP or vaccination provider to discuss privately purchasing the vaccine as an option.
- Vaccination is still recommended for people who have had shingles infection in the past. It is recommended to wait at least a year after recovery.

Check with your immunisation provider if you can get a free Shingrix® vaccine.

HOW ARE CHICKEN POX AND SHINGLES TREATED?

- Anti-viral medications, such as acyclovir, can help in the treatment of shingles if they are prescribed in the initial stages of the infection.
- The medication reduces the healing time of blisters, stops the new blisters developing and shortens the length of time a person might spend in pain.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about preparations you can apply to relieve pain.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I GET CHICKEN POX OR SHINGLES?

- Chickenpox is a notifiable condition in Victoria and high-risk cases are monitored by local Public Health Units.
- Varicella vaccine can provide some protection against chickenpox, even if given up to five days after exposure.
- People at elevated risk of complications following exposure include pregnant women who have not had chickenpox and who have not been immunized, newborn babies, and some people with immunosuppression due to illness or treatments.
- Talk to your doctor or local health provider for more information and clinical advice.

More information

[Chickenpox - Better Health Channel](#)

[Shingles - Better Health Channel](#)