

MISSOULA CITY-COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT DISEASE FACT SHEETS



CHICKENPOX (VARICELLA)

WHAT IS CHICKENPOX?

CHICKENPOX IS A HIGHLY INFECTIOUS DISEASE CAUSED BY THE VARICELLA VIRUS. IN MILD CLIMATES, CHICKENPOX OCCURS MOST FREQUENTLY IN WINTER AND EARLY SPRING.

WHO GETS CHICKENPOX?

CHICKENPOX IS COMMON IN THE UNITED STATES. ALMOST EVERYONE WHO IS NOT VACCINATED GETS CHICKENPOX BY ADULTHOOD.

HOW IS CHICKENPOX SPREAD?

CHICKENPOX IS SPREAD TO OTHERS BY DIRECT PERSON-TO-PERSON CONTACT, BY DROPLET OR AIRBORNE SPREAD OF DISCHARGES FROM AN INFECTED PERSON'S NOSE AND THROAT OR INDIRECTLY BY CONTACT WITH ARTICLES FRESHLY SOILED BY DISCHARGES FROM THE INFECTED PERSON'S LESIONS. THE SCABS THEMSELVES ARE NOT CONSIDERED INFECTIOUS.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CHICKENPOX?

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE SLIGHT FEVER, FEELING TIRED AND WEAK, SOON FOLLOWED BY AN ITCHY BLISTER-LIKE RASH. THE BLISTERS EVENTUALLY DRY, CRUST OVER AND FORM SCABS. THE BLISTERS TEND TO BE MORE COMMON ON COVERED THAN ON EXPOSED PARTS OF THE BODY. THEY MAY APPEAR ON THE SCALP, ARMPITS, AND EVEN ON THE EYELIDS AND IN THE MOUTH. MILD INFECTIONS OCCASIONALLY OCCUR IN CHILDREN. THE DISEASE IS USUALLY MORE SERIOUS IN ADULTS THAN IN CHILDREN.

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

SYMPTOMS COMMONLY APPEAR 14-16 DAYS (RANGE OF 10-21 DAYS) AFTER BEING AROUND SOMEONE WITH CHICKENPOX.

WHEN AND FOR HOW LONG IS A PERSON ABLE TO SPREAD CHICKENPOX?

A PERSON IS MOST ABLE TO SPREAD CHICKENPOX FROM ONE TO TWO DAYS BEFORE THEIR SYMPTOMS APPEAR AND UNTIL THE RASH AND BLISTERS HAVE CRUSTED.

DOES PAST INFECTION WITH CHICKENPOX MAKE A PERSON IMMUNE?

MOST PEOPLE WHO GET CHICKENPOX NEVER GET IT AGAIN. OCCASIONALLY THIS INFECTION CAN STAY HIDDEN IN THE BODY AND APPEAR LATER AS ANOTHER ILLNESS CALLED SHINGLES THAT CAN AFFECT OLDER ADULTS AND SOMETIMES CHILDREN.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH CHICKENPOX?

NEWBORN CHILDREN (LESS THAN ONE MONTH OLD) WHOSE MOTHERS HAVE NOT EVER HAD CHICKENPOX MAY SUFFER SEVERE, PROLONGED OR FATAL CHICKENPOX. ANYONE WHO IS IMMUNOCOMPROMISED MAY HAVE AN INCREASED RISK OF DEVELOPING A SEVERE FORM OF CHICKENPOX OR SHINGLES. ASPIRIN OR ASPIRIN-CONTAINING PRODUCTS SHOULD NEVER BE GIVEN TO A CHILD WITH CHICKENPOX BECAUSE IT COULD CAUSE ANOTHER ILLNESS, REYE'S SYNDROME.

IS THERE A VACCINE FOR CHICKENPOX?

A VACCINE FOR CHICKENPOX IS AVAILABLE.

WHAT CAN A PERSON OR COMMUNITY DO TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF CHICKENPOX?

THE BEST WAY TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF CHICKENPOX IS FOR PEOPLE INFECTED WITH THE DISEASE TO REMAIN HOME AND AVOID BEING AROUND OTHERS WHO COULD GET SICK. NEWBORNS AND IMMUNOCOMPROMISED PEOPLE SHOULD BE EXTRA CAREFUL TO STAY AWAY FROM PEOPLE SICK WITH CHICKENPOX.