Chickenpox in Adults

Chickenpox is an illness caused by a virus. This virus can spread easily from one person to another. Those with chickenpox almost never get it more than once. While it usually strikes children, adults who have never had the illness or vaccine can get chickenpox. In children, the illness is reasonably mild, although annoying. In adults, it can be very serious.

CAUSES

A varicella-zoster virus causes chickenpox. The virus is passed in tiny droplets that the infected person coughs or sneezes into the air. Chickenpox can also be passed when someone comes into contact with the fluid produced by the chickenpox rash. When someone has been exposed to chickenpox, he or she usually comes down with the illness within about 10-21 days.

SYMPTOMS

The illness usually starts with:

- Body aches and pain.
- Headache.
- Irritability.
- Tiredness.
- Fever.
- Sore throat.

A day or two later, a rash develops. The rash is made up of very itchy blisters. The rash lasts about 5-7 days. Each "chicken pock" heals over with a crusty scab.

Chickenpox is very serious illness in adults. There is a higher risk of complications, including:

- Pneumonia.
- Skin infection.
- Bone infection (*osteomyelitis*).
- Joint infection (*septic arthritis*).
- Brain infection (*encephalitis*).
- Toxic shock syndrome.
- Bleeding problems.
- Problems with balance and muscle control (*cerebellar ataxia*).
- Death.

Women who get chickenpox during pregnancy have a higher risk of having a baby with birth defects.

DIAGNOSIS

A diagnosis is based on the presence of the usual symptoms of achiness and fever along with the characteristic rash. If there is any question, blood tests can be done to diagnose the infection.

TREATMENT

Treatment for chickenpox may include:

- Taking the anti-viral drug acyclovir to shorten the length of the illness and to decrease its severity. The drug has to be started within 24 hours of symptoms.
- Taking medicine as directed by your caregiver.
- Applying calamine lotion to decrease itchiness.
- Baking soda or oatmeal baths to soothe itchy skin.

When a person who has never had chickenpox has been exposed to the virus (especially a pregnant woman or a patient with HIV/AIDS) they might benefit from a shot of varicella-zoster immune globulin (VZIG). This helps prevent the person from actually coming down with the illness. VZIG must be given within 72 hours of exposure to the virus.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Only take over-the-counter or prescriptions medicines for pain, discomfort or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- Try taking a lukewarm (not hot) bath every few hours. Adding several tablespoons of baking soda or oatmeal may help make the bath more soothing.

- Ice packs or cold washcloths applied to the rash may help improve itching.
- Ask your caregiver if you may use an over-the-counter antihistamine (such as diphenhydramine) to decrease itching.
- Wash your hands often. This helps lower the risk of a bacterial skin infection, as well as passing the virus to others. If you can, use alcohol-based rubs or wipes. If you cannot get these, use regular soap and water.
- If you have blisters in your mouth, **do not** eat or drink spicy, salty, or acidic things. Soft, bland, cold foods and beverages will feel best.
- Avoid people who have not had chicken pox or women who are pregnant.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have a hard time breathing.
- You have a severe headache.
- You have a stiff neck.
- You have severe joint pain or stiffness.
- You feel disoriented or confused.
- You are having trouble walking or keeping your balance.
- You have an oral temperature above 100.4° F (38° C).
- The area around one of the chicken pox becomes very red, hot to the touch, painful or leaks pus.

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