

17th October 2019

Dear Parents/Guardians,

There has been a case of chickenpox reported at Little Fingers Pre-school and your child may have been exposed. If your child has not had chickenpox before it is quite likely that he/she may catch it.

What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by a virus which causes an itchy rash starting with flat red spots that become raised and filled with fluid. Chickenpox is usually a mild childhood illness but there is a risk of complications in people who have a weakened immune system, including young babies and pregnant women.

What are the symptoms?

Chickenpox usually begins with the onset of a slight fever, feeling generally unwell for a couple of days before the spots appear.

The spots can appear everywhere, they usually begin on the scalp/face and back, but they can be seen inside the mouth and genitalia. It is rarely seen on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. The rash is very itchy. The spots leave scarring if they are scratched and become infected.

The spots look flat and red; these later become raised and filled with fluid. Most children become free from chickenpox in less than two weeks.

Is it infectious?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person; the virus is shed from the nose or throat as droplets or by direct contact. The fluid inside the spot is infectious. Chickenpox is *highly* infectious during its early stages from one - two days before until five days after spots first appear.

What is the incubation period?

The incubation period of chickenpox is between 13 and 17 days after contact with the infected person. The following groups of people should seek advice from their GP if they are exposed to chickenpox and do not remember if they have been previously infected with the virus:

- Pregnant women
- Babies whose mothers developed chickenpox in the first 28 days of their life.
- People who are immunosuppressed (e.g. people having large doses of oral steroids or receiving chemotherapy for cancer / leukaemia / HIV related illness).

Although chickenpox is a mild disease in normal healthy children, it can be serious in individuals whose immune systems are impaired in any way such as those on treatment for leukaemia or who have had a transplant. Many of these individuals may be immune to chickenpox or may have had the vaccine and so are protected however, it is important to let you know if there is a case of chickenpox in pre-school as you can then take the necessary action (this would usually mean an injection of protective antibody from your doctor).

What is the treatment?

The most common treatment for chickenpox is aimed at relieving the symptoms:

- A pharmacist can recommend effective itch-relieving products
- Ice lollies may help to reduce a fever
- Paracetamol can be given according to the age of the child. Aspirin must not be given to children under 16yrs old.
- Ibuprofen should not be given to children with chickenpox.
- Nails should be kept short to prevent damaging the skin from scratching
- Wear loose, cool clothes and keep the room temperature cool as this may help to reduce itching

Are there any complications?

- The majority of people affected by chickenpox suffer no long-term effects however there is an increased risk that individuals could develop shingles later in life due to the virus remaining dormant in the body following chickenpox then reactivating later.
- Bacterial infections can arise if the blistered areas become contaminated with bacteria.
- Very occasionally chickenpox infection causes pneumonia, which presents as a persistent high fever and a severe dry cough
- Very rarely it can lead to a condition called Encephalitis. This is an inflammation of the brain which can occur between seven days and ten days after the onset of the rash. Encephalitis is very rare, and would present with symptoms of drowsiness, headache, neck stiffness, dislike of bright lights and possibly convulsions.

What is the exclusion period for chickenpox?

Individuals should be kept away from pre-school/school for at least five days from onset of rash AND until all lesions have crusted over.

Is it necessary for individuals with chickenpox to see their Doctor?

There is no requirement to routinely visit a general practitioner if the affected individual has uncomplicated chickenpox. Chickenpox is a self-limiting illness for most children who will usually be completely better within two weeks. Taking the child to a busy doctor's surgery increases the risk of further spread of the virus and there is no specific treatment other than that available from a local pharmacy to relieve symptoms. It is worth recording that a child has had chickenpox on their immunisation record sheet.

I am pregnant and may have been exposed to a child with chickenpox. What should I do?

Most adults are immune to chickenpox as they have had the illness in childhood. If you have not had chickenpox in the past and have had recent contact with chickenpox you should contact your GP, who may wish to do a blood test to check if you are immune. Chickenpox infection in pregnancy may cause more severe illness and there may be a risk to the foetus.

Thank you for giving this your attention. Your GP will be able to answer any further questions that you might have about chickenpox.

With kind regards

Olivia Duckney
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