



Student Health Center

UNC Wilmington

INSTRUCTION SHEET: CHICKENPOX

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed chickenpox, a viral infection most often occurring in children.

Chickenpox causes a distinctive rash of tiny blisters. The small, fluid-filled blisters dry into crusty, weeping sores after a few days. The blisters typically appear in two-to-four “crops” over two-to-six days. The total number of sores ranges from just a few to hundreds. The rash is usually gone within two weeks.

The skin rash of chickenpox may cause intense itching. Other common symptoms include low-grade fever, lack of energy, headache, and body aches.

Chickenpox is contagious: the infection is spread by direct contact (touching) or through droplets from the mouth (coughing, sneezing, or breathing on others). The incubation period (time from exposure until symptoms appear) is about two weeks (range 10 to 21 days). Infected persons are contagious until all skin lesions are crusted and dried.

Complications are rare in chickenpox: Skin infection and encephalitis (brain infection) can result.

Skin infection occurs because sores allows bacteria (normally present in large numbers on the skin surface) to enter normally germ-free layers under the skin. Scratching the sores may lead to more frequent infection. Symptoms include: redness, swelling, warmth, and tenderness-to-touch of the affected area.

Encephalitis is a rare but very serious condition caused by spread of chickenpox infection to the brain. Symptoms include severe headache and high fever.

Common-sense measures to treat symptoms caused by chickenpox are important. An anti-viral medication can also help in some cases.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT CHICKENPOX:

- 1- Rest at home. Drink plenty of liquids.
- 2- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be taken for fever and aches. Aspirin should be avoided, as there is an increased risk of a serious condition called Reye's Syndrome.
- 3- If antiviral medicine is prescribed, take it regularly, as directed.
- 4- The skin and lesions should be gently cleaned daily to help prevent skin infection. Young children's nails should be clipped short to prevent deep scratches.
- 5- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) liquid or capsules can be taken by mouth to relieve itching. Diphenhydramine is available over-the-counter.
- 6- Make a prompt follow-up appointment with your personal/referral doctor. Your doctor can answer questions, help control symptoms, and make sure you are improving.
- 7- Most importantly, if your/your child's condition worsens, go to the closest emergency department immediately. Specifically, seek care if you/our child: has a severe headache, looks sicker than just “feeling bad,” stops taking even liquids, or is excessively drowsy.