

## Chickenpox (Varicella)

### What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is an infection caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Shingles, also known as herpes zoster is also caused by the varicella-zoster virus, however its symptoms and mode of transmission are slightly different. Please refer to the shingles information sheet.

### What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

- Mild fever, aches, pains, a headache and a loss of appetite.
- Days later, a rash appears. Red spots (lesions) appear first on the face and scalp, and then spread quickly down the body and to the arms and legs. The spots become very itchy and begin to look like blisters, filled with clear fluid.
- Another few days later, the fluid becomes cloudy, the blisters break, and a crust or scab forms while the skin heals. During this time, new "crops" of spots appear, form blisters, and then crust over.
- Chickenpox usually lasts about 10 days.

### How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is transmitted either by inhalation of the airborne virus with someone known to have chickenpox  
**OR**

by direct or indirect contact with the infected patient's oral or nasal mucous membranes, vesicle fluids (discharge from spots) or respiratory secretions.

An example of direct contact is touching the patient's rash or mucous membranes. Indirect contact can include handling contaminated personal items such as laundry.

A pregnant woman with chickenpox can give it to her baby before birth.

**Note:** Dried scabs from a chickenpox rash are not infectious.

### When is a person infectious?

- The infected person is infectious 2 days before the onset of rash until all lesions are dry, have crusted over and no new lesions are forming.
- Exposed non-immune persons are considered potentially infectious 8 to 21 days following exposure. If the exposed person received varicella immunoglobulin (VZIG), then he/she is considered infectious 8 to 28 days following exposure.

### How do I know if I am immune?

An employee is considered immune if he/she has:

- a history of chickenpox disease after 12 months of age or a history of shingles disease
- have 2 documented doses of the varicella vaccine received at least one month apart (immunized individuals are considered immune 4 weeks after the second dose)
- have a documented laboratory report of immunity (positive VZV IgG titres)

If the employee has not provided Workplace Health with the above information, he/she will be considered non-immune.

### When is an employee exposed?

A staff member is considered exposed if they are at risk for transmission and did not use personal protective measures.

Chickenpox is transmitted either:

1. by inhalation of the airborne virus, i.e. face-to-face contact for 5 or more minutes or spent 1 hour in the room with someone known to have chickenpox

OR

2. by direct or indirect contact with the infected patient's:
  - a. oral or nasal mucous membranes
  - b. vesicle fluids (discharge from spots)
  - c. respiratory secretions from an infectious patient

### **What happens if an employee is exposed?**

If an employee is exposed to shingles and is immune to chickenpox, they do not need to alter any activities and can continue to work. They should not develop chickenpox and they cannot spread the disease to others.

Employees who are not immune (i.e. who haven't had the disease or vaccinations) will not be allowed to be at work from day 8 through to day 21 after exposure. Exclusion will be extended to day 28 if the employee received VZV Immunoglobulin.

Non-immune employees can be vaccinated for their own protection within 3 days up to 5 days after exposure, but will not be allowed to be at work from day 8 thru day 28 after exposure.

Non immune employees will be followed up by the Workplace Health Call Centre Occupational Health Nurse (WHCC OHN), may be requested to have laboratory testing done and may be excluded from work as above.

### **What happens if an employee has chickenpox?**

Infected employees must stay away from work and see their doctor as soon as possible for confirmation of the disease and treatment.

Confirmed infected employees must stay away from work until lesions are dry and crusted, and no new lesions are forming.

### **Manager/Supervisor Responsibilities:**

Suspected Outbreak or staff exposure from patient: consult with Infection Control. Infection Control will confirm diagnosis, notify and collaborate with the Workplace Health Call Centre Occupational Health Nurse (WHCC OHN). No additional action required until confirmation of disease.

Confirmed Outbreak/Staff exposure: Infection Control will inform the WHCC OHN of the confirmed disease exposure. The WHCC OHN will contact the manager and send out an exposure notification memo to the manager. Please advise all staff members that meet the exposure criteria to contact the WHCC OHN at 1-866-922-9464.

Advise infected employees to contact the WHCC OHN.

### **Employee Responsibilities:**

Infected or exposed employee: please contact the WHCC OHN at 1-866-922-9464 and review the information above.

### **Additional Information/References:**

- HealthLinkBC File: [Facts About Chickenpox - BC HealthFile #44a](#). November 2012. Retrieved on July, 7 201.
- HealthLinkBC File: [Chickenpox \(Varicella\) Vaccine - BC HealthFile #44b](#). October 2016. Retrieved on July, 7 2017
- BCCDC Communicable Disease Control Manual. [Varicella Zoster](#). July 2004. Retrieved on May 3, 2013.
- Canada Communicable Disease Report. [Prevention & Control of Occupational Infections in Health Care](#). March 2002. Retrieved on May 3, 2013
- Fraser Health Authority Intranet (FHPulse). Workplace Health. [Varicella](#). July 2004. Retrieved on May 3, 2013.