

Chickenpox : Frequently Asked Questions

Since the chickenpox vaccine was licensed in 1995 and put into use throughout the United States, the number of chickenpox cases has decreased dramatically and the presentation of this illness has changed. With the occurrence of milder cases after vaccination (known as breakthrough disease), chickenpox is becoming more difficult to diagnose. This FAQ is to provide you with current information on chickenpox.

What does chickenpox look like?

Typical chickenpox symptoms include fever, tiredness, and an itchy rash with small blisters that dry up and form scabs in about 5 days. The rash usually appears first on the body and face and can spread over the entire body with 250-500 itchy lesions. Complications from chickenpox, such as pneumonia, inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) or a severe bacterial infection can occur. Individuals who have received the chickenpox vaccine can still get chickenpox if exposed to the virus. This is called *breakthrough disease*.

What does breakthrough disease look like?

Breakthrough disease is usually a very mild case of chickenpox with fewer lesions (usually less than 50) lasting only a few days, with no fever or a low fever, and few other symptoms. The lesions often do not look like typical chickenpox blisters either. They tend to look like small, raised, itchy, red bumps that resemble mosquito bites or acne. Since breakthrough disease usually does not look like typical chickenpox, it can often be difficult to diagnose. Call your health care provider if you are not sure if your child has breakthrough disease.

My child was vaccinated years ago and this year he/she developed a mild case of chickenpox. Why did this happen?

No vaccine is 100% effective. Breakthrough disease may be due to a number of different factors. One reason is that some people do not develop enough protection to completely prevent them from developing chickenpox. When they come into contact with a case of chickenpox, they may develop breakthrough disease.

Can someone with breakthrough disease spread chickenpox?

Yes. Therefore it is important that these individuals stay at home from school, childcare, and extracurricular activities (such as sports, band, drama club), until their lesions have dried and formed scabs, or until no new spots or bumps are forming.

Does breakthrough disease provide immunity like naturally occurring chickenpox?

Yes. A mild case of chickenpox, such as breakthrough disease, produces immunity to chickenpox as does the more moderate or severe cases of naturally occurring chickenpox.

If a person who has never had chickenpox or the vaccine comes into close contact with someone with chickenpox, would getting vaccinated help?

Yes. Vaccination may prevent or modify chickenpox if given up to 3 days, and possibly 5 days, after close exposure to chickenpox. They should contact their health care provider for vaccination.

What if I am pregnant and exposed to chickenpox?

Pregnant women who have never had chickenpox are at risk of getting chickenpox during their pregnancy. A small percentage of pregnant women who get chickenpox in the first or second trimester can have babies with birth defects. In addition, chickenpox may be more severe in pregnant women and place them at a higher risk for complications due to chickenpox. You should contact your health care provider and inform them that you have been exposed to chickenpox.

If you have questions or need more information, please contact the Harford County Health Department, Division of Communicable Diseases at (410) 612-1774.