



The Children's Doctor

All you need to know about . . . Chickenpox



What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a viral infection which is usually mild and of short duration. The rash usually appears 14-21 days after contact with the virus. It is usually associated with a fever. The rash typically involves the face, trunk and limbs but spots can be found in the nose, ears, eyelids, scalp and inside the mouth. It is highly contagious!

Occasionally, chickenpox can involve the brain, the spinal cord and the lungs.

4 people will die of chickenpox each year in Australia.

Who gets chickenpox?

Chickenpox can affect people at any age. By 12 years of age, 75% of children will have had chickenpox. About 5% of children will develop immunity to chickenpox without ever having the rash.

How should I treat chickenpox?

Because chickenpox is a virus, antibiotics are not indicated.

The best management is to keep the child as comfortable as possible whilst the illness runs its course. Frequent baths with Pinetarsol is very effective in relieving itch.

Calamine lotion can be applied to the spots after the bath. It is useful to keep the child entertained in order to distract them from the itchy spots.

The child should be kept isolated until all the spots are completely dried and no new spots have appeared for 48 hours.

If any spots look infected or if the child is unable to drink due to discomfort, then the child should be reviewed by the local doctor.

Should my child have chickenpox vaccine?

A single dose chickenpox vaccine is now available for widespread use in Australia. It has not been included in the mandatory immunisation schedule but is recommended by the NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council). It has been approved for use from 12 months of age. The most appropriate time to give the vaccine would be 18 months of age, to avoid giving too many needles at the same time! It is likely that the chickenpox vaccine will be added to the mandatory vaccines in the future. At the moment, the decision to have a child immunised remains with the parent.

Following vaccination, most children will be immune to chickenpox. However, 1-2% of vaccinated children each year will develop breakthrough infection after exposure to chickenpox. In this scenario, the infection is usually very mild.

Children who have had chickenpox are immune to the disease and do not require immunisation.