



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

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 allow 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. Clip fingernails short to prevent deep scratches.
5. To relieve itching, take over-the-counter antihistamines: In the morning, take a non-sedating antihistamine such as loratadine, 10 mg daily. At night, take diphenhydramine (Benadryl), 25 mg, 1 or 2 every 6 hours. The main side effect of diphenhydramine is drowsiness, so do not drive, operate machinery, climb a ladder, etc., while taking the medicine. Stop taking the antihistamines when the itching is gone.
6. Return to the Student Health Center or make a prompt follow-up appointment with your personal/referral provider as directed. Your provider can answer questions, help control symptoms, and make sure you are improving.
7. Most importantly, if your condition worsens, go to the closest emergency department *immediately*. Specifically, seek care if you have a severe headache, high fever, significant confusion, feel sicker than just “feeling bad,” or are excessively drowsy.