

CHICKEN POX (VARICELLA ZOSTER)

Chicken pox once was thought to be a common childhood infection that all children should have as part of their “growing up” events. Many people did not realize that although chicken pox is a common event, it may be a deadly event for a few children. Due to the fact that some children with chicken pox will have serious complications and may die, a vaccine for the disease was developed and is now required for school entry in South Dakota schools.

Symptoms of chicken pox include a rash that begins with raised circular lesions that have a water blister (vesicular) appearance. The lesions are most concentrated on the trunk, face and scalp and are very, very itchy. The illness is often accompanied by a fever that may actually start one or two days before the rash is noted. The average child will have as many as 250 to 500 vesicles over the first five days of the rash. Occasionally some of the pox may become infected with a secondary bacterial infection. A very rare occurrence of pneumonia, a blood infection and/or meningitis may affect the child with chicken pox.

Chicken pox is transmitted by the respiratory tract (droplets) and by contact with the lesions and/or drainage from the lesions. Transmission from the lesions may occur anytime until all the skin lesions have become scabbed or crusted (usually within 5-7 days). The infected person is contagious for two days prior to the rash occurring and the incubation period for the exposed person is 10-21 days. South Dakota child care laws require children to be out of childcare settings *until the sixth day after the onset of rash or sooner if ALL lesions have dried and crusted.*

The chicken pox vaccine is an effective method to decrease the risk of infection and especially decreases the risk of the major associated illnesses of meningitis and pneumonia. In South Dakota children are now required to have 2 doses of the vaccine for school entry. These are usually given when the child is 12- 15 months old and 5 years old. Older children and adults who have not had the actual disease should also receive the vaccine. This is especially important for adults who are working in the childcare setting since they may be exposed to the disease and will most likely be much more ill than the younger child who is infected with the virus.

Many people still feel it is best for children to contract chicken pox since it is considered a normal part of childhood. Due to the rare occurrence of secondary infections and the more serious varicella infection such as meningitis, this is not wise for children. In the past, parents purposely exposed their children to children who were sick with chicken pox. Again, this is not a wise practice due to the risk to the child.

Shingles is caused from the same virus as chicken pox. Anyone who has had chicken pox or has received the vaccine may become ill with shingles at anytime after the infection or immunization. A person who has not had the disease may contract chicken pox from someone with shingles.