



Chickenpox



Varicella-zoster virus



Overview

This is a viral infection. It usually results in an itchy rash and mild sickness that lasts for five to 10 days. This virus spreads easily among children. In the past, contracting chickenpox was a routine part of childhood for most people. But a vaccine has made infections much less common.

Causes

Chickenpox is caused by a virus called varicella-zoster. It can spread through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by direct contact with an infected person's rash.

Symptoms and Complications

The first symptoms of infection may be fever and headache. You may feel tired, and you may lose your appetite. Within a few days, small, itchy red blisters appear on your skin. They may begin on your head, chest and back. Gradually they spread to the rest of your body. These blisters burst, leak and form scabs. These usually fully heal within two weeks. For some people, chickenpox can cause complications. These can include pneumonia, bacterial infections and other serious problems.

Prevention

The chickenpox vaccine is the most effective way to prevent the spread of the virus. The vaccine is commonly given in two doses. A small number of people contract the virus in the period of time between the first and second doses. These people tend to have very mild symptoms and fewer skin blisters.

Treatment

In most cases, chickenpox infections require no treatment and will clear up on their own. Antihistamines can help ease the itching. In people who have a high risk for complications, such as newborns, pregnant women, adults, and people who have impaired immune systems, antiviral drugs may be helpful. Some people may need to be hospitalized.