Chickenpox and Disseminated Shingles
Patient Information

Infection Prevention

Information for patients

What is chickenpox?
Chickenpox is a highly infectious illness caused by the Varicella Zoster virus. People with chickenpox usually have itchy blisters all over their body and feel unwell.

Chickenpox can occur in people in the community and healthcare settings. It can occur at any time of the year but is more common in early spring and in the winter months.

What is disseminated shingles?
Once a person has chickenpox, the virus remains in their body and may cause shingles later in life. The blisters are usually found on only one part of the body.

However, if shingles is present over several parts of the body, it is called “disseminated shingles” which is considered to be as infectious as chickenpox.

A person who has not had chickenpox or been vaccinated, can catch chickenpox by coming into direct contact with fluid on the blisters of someone who has shingles or disseminated shingles.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox and disseminated shingles?
Symptoms include:
- Low grade fever
- Malaise (tiredness)
- A skin rash, with small raised bumps which become filled with fluid
- Muscle aches and pains
- Sore throat and runny nose.

How is chickenpox and disseminated shingles spread?
Both illnesses are spread through the air in small virus particles released from the blisters when they break. The virus can also spread by direct contact with fluid from the blisters or nose and throat of an infected person e.g. when they sneeze or cough.

People are generally infectious for one or two days (may be up to five days) before the onset of the rash and until all the blisters dry out and become crusted. It takes between 10 – 21 days after contact with someone with the infection for symptoms to appear.

Who is at risk of getting chickenpox or disseminated shingles?
People who have had chickenpox or two doses of the Varicella vaccine are considered to be protected from chickenpox for life.

People who have no immunity are at risk of developing chickenpox if exposed to an infectious person.

Disseminated shingles may occur in anyone who has previously had chickenpox but is more common in those who have weak immune systems.
I have been told I have chickenpox or disseminated shingles. What happens while I am in hospital?

Isolation: You will be cared for in a single room. Healthcare workers will wear masks, gowns and gloves when entering your room and during your care. This is to reduce the risk of spreading the virus to other patients they are caring for.

Hand hygiene: It is important that staff, patients and visitors clean their hands every time they enter or leave a room or cubicle. They can use alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water to clean their hands.

It's OK to ask: Please feel free to remind your healthcare worker to clean their hands.

As a patient, what should I do?

- Cover your nose/mouth when coughing or sneezing. If possible, cough into your elbow and not into your hands.
- Avoid scratching or picking at blisters, as this may lead to a bacterial infection or scarring.
- Use tissues when you need to cough or blow your nose. Wash or disinfect your hands immediately afterwards.
- You will be required to wear a mask when leaving the room.

Procedures and diagnostic tests:

If you are required to have any procedures/tests out of your room, there may be changes in schedules to ensure that other patients are not exposed to the virus.

What do my visitors need to do?

Only visitors who have had chickenpox or shingles or are certain that they have had two Varicella vaccinations should visit.

Non-immune visitors, especially babies and unvaccinated children should not visit you.

Visitors must wear a mask at all times in the room.

They will also need to wear a gown and gloves if they are directly involved in your care. Staff will show your visitors how to put on and remove these items.

Your visitors must ensure that their hands are clean by using either the alcohol based hand rub or soap and water before entering your room, after caring for you and when leaving your room.