



EPIDEMIOLOGY & SURVEILLANCE

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Varicella (Chicken Pox) Alert

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Cases of Varicella (chicken pox) have been increasing across Collin County. Varicella is a reportable condition in Texas and should be reported to the local health department. Schools and childcare settings remain high-risk environments for outbreaks. Prompt identification and exclusion of cases are critical to limiting transmission. Identified cases can be reported to Collin County Health Care Services Epidemiology fax 972-548-4436.

What is varicella?

Varicella is highly caused by varicella-zoster virus (VZV), which is a DNA virus that is a member of the herpesvirus group. Primary infection with VZV causes varicella. After the primary infection, VZV stays in the body (in the sensory nerve ganglia) as a latent infection. Reactivation of latent infection causes herpes zoster (shingles).

What are the symptoms of varicella?

A mild prodrome of fever and malaise may occur 1 to 2 days before rash onset, particularly in adults. In children, the rash is often the first sign of disease. In unvaccinated people, varicella progresses rapidly from macular to papular to vesicular lesions before crusting. The most common chickenpox complications are bacterial infections of the skin and soft tissues in children and pneumonia in adults.

Who is at risk?

People at risk for severe varicella include:

- Immunocompromised people without evidence of immunity to varicella.
- Pregnant women without evidence of immunity to varicella.
- Newborns whose mothers have varicella from 5 days before to 2 days after delivery.
- Premature babies exposed to varicella or herpes zoster.

How long is someone contagious?

The virus can be spread from person to person by direct contact, inhalation of aerosols from vesicular fluid of skin lesions of acute varicella or zoster; and possibly through infected respiratory secretions that also may be aerosolized.

A person with varicella is considered contagious beginning 1 to 2 days before rash onset until all the chickenpox lesions have crusted. Vaccinated people may develop lesions that do not crust. These people are considered contagious until no new lesions have appeared for 24 hours. Based on studies of transmission among household members, about 90% of susceptible close contacts will get varicella after exposure to a person with disease.

Testing and diagnosis

Laboratory testing is not required for varicella diagnoses. However if lab testing is requested, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) is the most helpful laboratory test for confirming cases of varicella.

Isolation

Healthcare providers should follow standard precautions, airborne precautions (negative air-flow rooms), and contact precautions until lesions are dry and crusted. If negative air-flow rooms are not available, patients with varicella should be isolated in closed rooms. They should have no contact with people without evidence of immunity. Patients with varicella should be cared for by staff with evidence of immunity.

More information can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/hcp/clinical-overview/index.html>