Chickenpox (Varicella) in Children

What is Chickenpox?
Chickenpox is a common childhood illness caused by the varicella zoster virus. It can also cause illness in adolescence and adults. The virus can reappear years later to cause a painful rash called shingles.

What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?
The first symptoms of chickenpox include a slight fever, tiredness, headache, and/or runny nose. This is followed in a day or two by a red, spotty rash which then becomes small, itchy, fluid-filled blisters. Eventually the blisters dry up and crust over.

Serious complications from chickenpox are rare but can include pneumonia (lung infection), encephalitis (swelling of the brain), and bacterial infection of the skin.

How is Chickenpox spread?
Chickenpox is spread through the air by droplets (sneezes or coughs) that contain the virus or by direct contact with the fluid in the blisters.

The disease is most contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears. Chickenpox is infectious until the last blister has crusted over or five days after the rash first appears, whichever is shorter. Symptoms usually occur 10-21 days after contact with an infected person.

Can Chickenpox be prevented?
Yes. There is a safe and effective chickenpox vaccine available. The vaccine is recommended for healthy individuals who have not yet had the disease.

Two doses of the chickenpox vaccine are free for children in Ontario. The first dose must be given at 15 months of age. The second dose is given as a combined MMRV (measles, mumps, rubella and varicella or chickenpox) vaccine at 4-6 years of age; before starting school.

Children who are born on or after January 1, 2000 are also eligible to receive two doses of varicella vaccine for free.

How is Chickenpox diagnosed?
Chickenpox is diagnosed by a blood test or a swab of a lesion. Your doctor can also diagnose chickenpox by your symptoms.

What can you do if your child has Chickenpox?
- Use calamine lotion to help relieve itching.
- Put an ice pack or cool moist washcloth on itchy areas for 20 to 30 minutes.
- Take a non-prescription pain reliever such as acetaminophen to relieve headache, fever or general aches and pains. Do not give aspirin or any products that contain acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) to a child under the age of 18 since this can lead to serious complications.
- The doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine for your child. This medicine helps only if started within 24 hours of the appearance of the first sores and may reduce the number of sores and days of illness.
- If blisters become infected or your child becomes very ill, contact your doctor for follow-up.
- Wash hands often to prevent infection.

If the caregiver of a child with chickenpox is pregnant, she may have a blood test to determine whether or not she is immune. Chickenpox may cause stillbirths or birth defects if it occurs during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy and could spread to the baby during childbirth. A healthcare provider can offer a pregnant woman without immunity an injection of Varicella-Zoster immune globulin to help prevent the disease.

When can my child go back to school?
The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that a child with mild chickenpox does not need to stay from school or daycare if he/she is feeling well enough to participate normally. Chickenpox is most contagious one to two days before the rash appears so isolation after a rash appears is not effective to prevention transmission.

For further information, please call your doctor or Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.