

# Chickenpox in pregnancy: What you need to know

An information guide



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## Key points

- If you have already had chickenpox – you have nothing to worry about.
- Once you have had chickenpox you cannot catch it a second time, this is known as being immune.
- Nine out of ten UK adults are immune to chickenpox.
- Chickenpox is very rare in pregnant women in the UK.
- It affects very few babies in the womb and although it can be serious it can usually be treated.
- If you have been in contact with chickenpox and are not sure if you are immune, contact your GP or midwife by phone, **but do not attend the antenatal clinic.**
- If you have chickenpox, avoid contact with other pregnant women and new babies until at least five days after the rash appears, or until all the blisters have crusted over.

## What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very infectious illness caused by a virus called **varicella zoster virus (VZV)**.

Nine out of ten people in the UK get chickenpox in childhood and are therefore immune. However, if you have not had chickenpox as a child and you catch chickenpox as an adult it can be more serious and if you are pregnant there may also be risks for your baby.

Adults from tropical or subtropical areas are less likely to have had chickenpox in childhood, so if you have moved to the UK you have a greater risk of catching chickenpox.

You can catch chickenpox by being in the same room as an infected person for at least 15 minutes, or face to face contact e.g. while having a conversation.

It takes between 1-3 weeks after you have had contact with someone having chickenpox before any symptoms appear in you. The first signs are a fever and feeling unwell, followed by an itchy rash of watery blisters. After a few days the blisters will burst, form a crust and finally heal over.

Someone with chickenpox can pass it on to others even before the rash appears and until all the blisters have crusted over.

If you are not immune to chicken pox try to avoid coming into contact with people who may have it. If you have been in contact with chicken pox, tell your midwife or doctor as your immunity can be checked.

### **What should I do if I come into contact with chickenpox?**

If you have immunity (have already had chickenpox) there is nothing to worry about, do nothing. If you have never had chickenpox, or if you are unsure, you will be offered a blood test to find out if you are immune.

- Contact your GP or midwife by phone, **but do not attend the antenatal clinic.**
- If you develop a rash, contact your GP or midwife immediately.

### **If I catch chickenpox whilst I am pregnant, how can it affect me?**

Although chickenpox is very rare in pregnant women it can be serious, with complications such as pneumonia. The risks are increased if you smoke, have a lung disease or if you are taking steroids.

## **If I catch chickenpox whilst I am pregnant, how can it affect my baby?**

**If you are immune** (already had chickenpox), your baby will have the benefits of your immunity during the pregnancy.

**If you are not immune**, there may be complications for your baby that you need to know about, so that you can seek early medical advice should you come into contact with the chickenpox virus.

The risks to an unborn baby depend on when the mother catches chickenpox.

- **Up to the 20th week** of pregnancy the baby may be affected. You will be offered a detailed scan which may identify if there are any problems .
- **Between the 20th and 36th week** of pregnancy the baby should be safe.
- **After the 36th week and up to 7 days after birth** the baby may get severe chicken pox, *but it can usually be treated*. Your baby will be monitored for 28 days after you become infected.

## **What should I do if I catch chickenpox?**

- Contact your GP or midwife immediately, **but do not attend the antenatal clinic**
- Report any breathing problems or new symptoms .
- Avoid contact with pregnant women and new babies until at least five days after the rash appears, or until all the blisters have crusted over.

## What is the treatment?

Chickenpox in pregnancy is managed by two different methods - one is used before the onset of symptoms and the other after the onset of rash.

One is **varicella-zoster immune globulin (VZIG)**, which strengthens the immune system for a short time. If you are not immune to chickenpox you can be treated with **VZIG**, usually by injection, up to ten days after you come into contact with chickenpox. It is used before any symptoms appear; it does not work afterwards.

The other is **Aciclovir**, which may reduce fever and symptoms if it is started within 24 hours of the rash developing. Your doctor or midwife can tell you more about the risks of **VZIG** as a human blood product.

## How can my baby be treated?

- If you get chickenpox within 7 days of giving birth your newborn baby will be given **VZIG**.
- If your baby is born with chickenpox it will usually be given **Aciclovir** by injection, which should help to support the baby's immune system.
- If your baby comes into contact with chickenpox within the first seven days after the birth it will be protected by any immunity you have. If you are not immune, or if you have given birth early, your baby can be given **VZIG**.
- It is safe to breastfeed if you have had chicken pox during pregnancy.

## What about shingles?

Although shingles is caused by the same virus as chickenpox it is not caught in the same way.

It is the reactivation of the virus that has been lying dormant in the nerve tissue (spinal ganglion) of someone who has had chickenpox in the past. It is infectious from the onset of the rash until all the scabs have crusted.

Unlike chickenpox, a person with shingles does not cough the virus out. The virus is just shed from the rash. Most people with shingles have a rash on their chest or abdomen and it is usually covered by clothes or dressings.

Therefore, you are not likely to catch chickenpox from someone with shingles if their rash is covered. Some people have shingles on exposed skin such as the face which will be more infectious.

If you avoid close contact with the person with shingles, you should be safe.

If you have had chickenpox yourself, then you will have antibodies to the virus that will protect you and your unborn baby.

However if you have never had chickenpox, or if you are not sure whether you have had it, there may be a small risk of you developing chickenpox if you come into contact with shingles.

Please contact your GP or midwife by phone for advice, **but do not attend the antenatal clinic.**

## **References:**

For further information please visit [www.pat.nhs.uk](http://www.pat.nhs.uk)

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