

North Carolina Women's Hospital

CHICKENPOX AND PREGNANCY

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox, also known as varicella, is a virus that spreads easily. It is most common in children. Chickenpox is passed from one person to another by breathing the air around a person who is already infected.

Why is chickenpox in pregnancy important?

Chickenpox in pregnancy can cause serious problems for the unborn baby, especially if the mother becomes infected in the early or late weeks of her pregnancy. Also, pregnant women can become much sicker from the infection than people who are not pregnant. The most serious complications for pregnant women are pneumonia and respiratory distress syndrome.

How do I know if I could become infected with chickenpox?

If you have never had chickenpox, a blood test can be done to find out if you could become infected. When you started prenatal care, this blood test may have been done for you. If you had this test, you need to know the results. A test result that is negative means you have not had chickenpox before. If you are around someone who is coming down with the infection or is already infected you could get chickenpox from them. If you had chickenpox as a child you are not at risk to become infected.

What should I do to protect my baby and me if I am at risk for getting chickenpox?

If you are around someone who has the chickenpox rash or is known to be infected, you should call your clinic right away. If you had a negative test for chickenpox at the beginning of your pregnancy, and you are around someone who has chickenpox, we will give you a medicine called acyclovir[®]. It will decrease the chances of you becoming infected or of becoming very sick if you do become infected. When you call the clinic, be sure to have a drugstore phone number so that the medicine can be called to a store that is close to you. You will need to start the medicine between 8 and 21 days after you were first around the person who has chickenpox. It is important to take all of the medicine.

How do I know if I am getting chickenpox?

You may notice several symptoms that you are getting sick with chickenpox. An early symptom is fever. Within a few days a rash starts that looks like small red pimples. The rash usually begins on the stomach, chest and back and then spreads to the head, face, arms and legs. The pimples then become blisters and eventually the blisters open and scabs form. These sores can be very itchy.

What should I do if I think I am getting chickenpox?

If you develop symptoms of chickenpox you can infect other people. Stay at home and make sure anyone who comes to visit knows you might have chickenpox. Do **not** go to your prenatal clinic or to a labor and delivery unit. Instead, you should call your clinic. A medicine called acyclovir[®] will be prescribed to decrease the seriousness of the infection. When you call, have a drugstore phone number available so that the medicine can be called to a nearby drugstore. You will need to take this medicine 4 times a day for 5 days.

If you start to have difficulty breathing or your temperature is 101° F (38.3° C.), you should call your clinic again. Do **not** go to your prenatal clinic or to a labor and delivery unit. Your clinic will tell you where to go to get the care you need. If you develop these problems when the clinic is closed, call the contact number you have been given to discuss what you should do to be as safe as possible.

If I get chickenpox is there anything else I can do?

Mostly, you can take care of yourself at home when you have chickenpox. Chickenpox rash can be very itchy. Here are some ideas to help you feel better.

- Take cool baths every 3-4 hours. You can add baking soda to the water to decrease the itching.
- You can put calamine lotion on the rash to decrease the itching
- If you have a fever you can take acetaminophen (Tylenol[®])
- Stay at home and rest unless you are told by a medical person to go to an emergency room
- Drink lots of fluids—water is the best choice

Is there anything I should do after I have my baby?

If you have never had chickenpox or the vaccine, you will need to be immunized to help protect you against chickenpox in the future. After your baby is born, you should receive one shot before you go home from the hospital and a second shot 4-8 weeks later when you have your postpartum exam. **You need both shots before you are protected so be sure you get the second one!**