Varicella Infection (Chickenpox)

This sheet is about having varicella infection (chickenpox) in a pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Varicella, commonly called chickenpox, is a viral infection that usually happens in childhood. Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). The most common symptom of chickenpox is a rash which first appears as small, reddish spots or pimples. These spots will blister and then scab over. New spots appear for up to 3-5 days. Often a fever and body aches occur before the rash appears. Pneumonia also occurs in 10-15% of teenagers and adults who have chickenpox.

How do you get chickenpox?

Chickenpox is very contagious. This means that it can spread easily from person to person. A person who has chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before they break out in a rash and continues to be contagious until all of their spots are scabbed over. If you have never had chickenpox before and someone in your household is infected, there is a 90% chance that you will catch it as well. Infection happens less often after exposure in other places, such as a school. People develop symptoms about 7-21 days after being exposed to chickenpox.

How can I find out if I am infected with varicella?

Your healthcare provider can do a blood test to find out if you have a current infection with chickenpox. They can also test to see if you have ever had chickenpox in the past. When a person has chickenpox, they make antibodies to the virus. These antibodies usually last a long time and keep a person from getting chickenpox again. (The person becomes immune.) People who are immune are not likely to develop chickenpox if they are exposed to the virus again.

If you have recently been around someone with chickenpox and you do not have immunity, talk to your healthcare provider about what steps you can take to avoid getting chickenpox, or to reduce the severity of the symptoms.

I have chickenpox. Can it make it harder for me to become pregnant?

Based on the data available, it is not known if chickenpox can make it harder to get pregnant.

Does getting chickenpox increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Based on the data available, it is not known if chickenpox can increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does getting chickenpox increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. About 2% of babies (1 in 50) of a pregnant person with chickenpox will have 1 or more birth defects due to the infection. 1% (1/100) of pregnancies that are infected with chickenpox in the first trimester have birth defects related to chickenpox (and 99% do not). When chickenpox occurs between 13 and 20 weeks of pregnancy, the chance for birth defects related to the chickenpox infection is to 2% (98% of pregnancies do not have related birth defects). The chance for birth defects is greatest when chickenpox develops between 7 and 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Babies with birth defects from exposure to chickenpox in pregnancy are said to have congenital varicella syndrome. The birth defects include scars on the skin, eye problems, poor growth, underdevelopment of an arm or leg, small head size, or delayed development and/or intellectual disability. Some babies may have only one of these problems while others have some or all. However, most babies born to women who have chickenpox in pregnancy are healthy.

Could getting chickenpox cause other pregnancy complications?

Preterm delivery (delivery before 37 weeks of pregnancy) is more common in women who have chickenpox in the first half of their pregnancies.

My due date is in 3 weeks, and I have just been exposed to chickenpox. Is there any risk to my baby if I...
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**develop chickenpox at this stage of pregnancy?**

If you already had chickenpox or had the vaccine, your past infection / vaccine should protect you. If you have not had chickenpox or the vaccine, talk to your healthcare provider right away. If you develop chickenpox 5 days or less before delivery or 1-2 days after delivery, there is a 20-25% chance your newborn could also develop chickenpox. Chickenpox infection in this time period is called neonatal varicella. Neonatal varicella can be severe.

If you develop chickenpox between 6 and 21 days before delivery, there is still a chance your newborn could develop neonatal varicella. However, because your baby will get some of your newly-made chickenpox antibodies, the neonatal varicella is more likely to be mild.

**Does getting chickenpox in pregnancy cause long-term problems in behavior or learning for the baby?**

Most babies born to a person who had chickenpox in pregnancy are healthy. However, some children could have eye problems, small head size, or delayed development and/or intellectual disability.

**Can I breastfeed while sick with chickenpox?**

The chickenpox virus has not been found in breast milk of people with a chickenpox infection. Breast milk might contain antibodies that can help to protect your baby from getting chickenpox. However, because chickenpox is very contagious, talk to your child’s pediatrician right away if you come down with chickenpox. It is important to prevent your baby from coming into direct contact with the rash or the affected areas in order lower the chances of your baby from getting the virus. If you suspect your baby has any symptoms that could be due to chickenpox, contact the child’s healthcare provider.

**If a male has chickenpox, can it make it harder to get the partner pregnant or increase the chance of birth defects?**

There are no studies looking at possible risks to a pregnancy when the partner has chickenpox. A study that tested semen in people while they had chickenpox did not find any signs of the virus in the semen. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. However, if the partner is not immune to chickenpox, there is a risk of the pregnant person becoming infected. If you have been exposed to chickenpox and you have not had chickenpox or the vaccine, talk to your healthcare provider right away. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here to view references.