

VIRGINIA PENINSULA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

VARICELLA VIRUS INFORMATION SHEET

Transmission and Incidence:

Varicella viral infection enters the body by means of direct droplet contact through the respiratory system. The incubation period is two to three weeks before localized and systemic signs and symptoms appear. The person is considered infectious from the time of exposure until the final lesions crust over. Chickenpox is a common childhood illness with susceptibility typically extending from six months of age to the time the disease is contracted. Immunity is produced after a course of the disease.

Clinical Manifestations:

Early symptoms include mild headache, low-grade fever, malaise, and anorexia, which occur about 24 hours before the first rash appears. The initial rash, which is maculopapular, appears on the head and mucous membranes and evolves within hours to itching, teardrop-shaped vesicles containing a clear fluid. The vesicles break and crust over within six to eight hours. New lesions erupt in successive crops on the trunk and in sparse sprinkles on the extremities. The acute phase of the disease lasts four to seven days, and new lesions seldom appear after the fifth day. All lesions are generally healed in two to three weeks.

Complications:

The disease may be severe in adults or in individuals whose T-cell immunity is depressed or who are taking corticosteroids or undergoing chemotherapy. Complications include conjunctival ulcers, encephalitis, meningitis, thrombocytopenia, secondary abscesses, cellulites, pneumonia, sepsis, Guillain-Barre syndrome, and Reye's syndrome. Scratching of the lesions may cause scarring or disfigurement.

Immunization Process:

Varicella virus vaccine has been developed to prevent this infection and has been approved for use among healthy adolescents and adults. Because natural varicella viral infection can be severe in older adolescents and adults, varicella immunity is desirable in these age groups: Persons 13 years of age or older should be administered two 0.5 mL doses of vaccine, subcutaneously, 4-8 weeks apart. Persons over the age of 13 years who have reliable histories of varicella are considered to be immune. All susceptible health workers should ensure that they are immune to varicella.