

# Shingles infects unvaccinated kids with chickenpox

By Karen Graf

Chickenpox cases have increased among unvaccinated school-age children this year in Montana and Yellowstone County, according to the state Department of Public Health and Human Services. At least half of these infections were acquired from an adult family member with shingles.

Chickenpox or varicella is a highly contagious illness caused by the varicella -zoster virus. It is transmitted by person-to-person contact or through the air by coughing or sneezing.

The most common symptoms of chickenpox are rash, fever, coughing, headache and loss of appetite.

The itchy, blister-like rash usually develops on the scalp and torso and then spreads to the face, arms and legs. The rash first appears as many small, itchy, red bumps which turn into blisters, emerging in several successive “crops.” Chickenpox lasts five to ten days.

If your child begins having symptoms, please keep your child out of childcare or school for seven days and until all blisters are dried and crusted over.

Chickenpox can be serious – even life-threatening – especially in babies, adolescents, adults, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems.

A highly effective vaccine to prevent chickenpox is available. Here is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recommended schedule:

- Children should get one dose between 12 and 15 months of age. They should receive a second dose at age 4 through 6 years.
- Older children who haven’t had the chickenpox vaccine can catch up by getting two doses three months apart up to age 13 years.
- People age 13 years and older (including adults) who have never had chickenpox or received chickenpox vaccine should get two doses four weeks apart.

The varicella-zoster virus also causes shingles in people who have had chicken pox. People with shingles can spread the virus to people who have never had chickenpox or never received the chickenpox vaccine.

After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus remains in the body. People get shingles when the virus reactivates in their bodies.

People with shingles can spread the virus to people who have never had chickenpox or never received the chickenpox vaccine through direct contact with fluid from shingles rash blisters. If unvaccinated

people get infected, they will develop chickenpox, not shingles. If you have shingles, prevent spread of the virus by covering the blisters and washing your hands thoroughly and frequently.

The best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. Ask your healthcare provider about getting protected against chickenpox or call the RiverStone Health Immunization Clinic at 406-247-3382 for an appointment.

*Karen Graf, MSN, RN-BC, APHN-BC, manages the RiverStone Health Rural School Nursing program. She can be reached at 406-247-3367.*