

**MSAD # 13 / RSU #83
Health Alert**

**Chickenpox (Varicella)
Important Notice to Parents**

Varicella is a viral illness that is very contagious and is caused by the herpes zoster virus. Early symptoms can include rapid onset of fever and fatigue which begin about 10 - 21 days after exposure. These symptoms are followed by the appearance of flat, red spots which progress to an itchy rash with fluid-filled vesicles that are characteristic of the disease. Lesions appear in crops over several days and lesions will be present in several stages of development.

Each lesion begins as a small dew drop like vesicle (blister) that scabs over in 3–4 days. These lesions tend to be more abundant on the trunk than on the arms and legs. Lesions in the eyes and mouth may also occur.

A vaccine is available to prevent the disease. However, sometimes people who have had the vaccine will still get chickenpox (called 'breakthrough disease'). If vaccinated people do get chickenpox, it is usually very mild. They will have fewer spots which may not appear typical and may not have vesicles (blisters), and they are less likely to have a fever, and usually recover faster.

This illness is often more severe in teens and adults than in younger children. Use of antiviral medication such as acyclovir, may decrease the number of lesions and duration of outbreak of lesions but is most beneficial if started within 24 hours of rash development.

If a pregnant woman gets varicella during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy, her baby has a 1 in a 100 risk of having serious birth defects. Pregnant women who have been exposed to somebody with chickenpox should contact their doctor immediately. Those who are not sure if they had chickenpox can have a blood test to see if they are protected against the virus.

Chickenpox is usually not serious, however, it may cause more severe illness in some children leading to hospitalization. Serious complications may include pneumonia, encephalitis, secondary bacterial infections, and even death.

Chickenpox is very contagious. It spreads easily from person to person through the air by coughing and sneezing or by direct contact with the fluid from a chickenpox lesion. It can also be spread indirectly through articles freshly soiled by discharge from vesicles (blisters) and mucous membranes of infected individuals.

Individuals with varicella are considered infectious from 1–2 days before the rash appears and until all lesions are crusted over (average range, 4–7 days after rash onset, but may last as long as 10 days). Chickenpox is not transmitted to or from animals.

The incubation period normally ranges from 10 - 21 days, but most commonly 14 - 16 days. but symptoms may appear 10 to 21 days after exposure.

To prevent spread of infection contact with infected individuals and any objects or clothing that could have been in contact with the fluid from blisters should be avoided.

Varicella vaccination (or an exemption to vaccination) is required for all children to attend school in Maine. Chickenpox vaccine (also known as varicella vaccine) is recommended for persons 12 months of age or older who have not had chickenpox. Please consider contacting your child's health care provider as soon as possible to obtain varicella vaccine for your child if they have not had chickenpox disease or have not received 2 doses of varicella vaccine. Adults having contact with students attending SAD 13, who have not had chickenpox, should consider receiving varicella vaccine.

If your child develops chickenpox, he/she should not attend school, public gatherings, or contact with susceptible persons until vesicles become dry and have entirely crusted over, or in cases of mild, "break-through" disease, until the lesions have faded or disappeared. Please notify the school if your child has chickenpox.

Please contact the school nurse, Mel Chadbourne, RN if you have any questions. More information is also available at the Maine CDC web site and on the reverse side of this letter.