



Health Notes

from the Lilydale Pharmacy

Chickenpox

Chickenpox is around again. It is true that uncomplicated chickenpox is a comparatively mild disease. Most patients are able to cope quite well with the symptoms, despite their discomfort.

The first visible sign of chickenpox is a rash of small red spots, usually beginning on the head and back and spreading over most of the body within a few days. Gradually the spots take on a fluid-filled blister appearance. Finally these blisters break and form crusts. All these stages of the rash may be present on the body at the one time.

A headache or mild fever may precede the appearance of spots and the person with chickenpox is contagious from this very early stage until the last blisters have crusted and dried – usually about 7 to 10 days.

Chickenpox is easily passed on from an infected person by coughing or sneezing, or by contact with the watery fluid in the blisters.

There may be just a few, or up to several hundred blistery spots appearing, but there will be no scarring unless a secondary bacterial infection occurs – usually from scratching the itchy sores. So the itch and irritation need to be controlled. Keep the finger nails short.

The use of wet dressings, cold compresses and baths is helpful. The addition to the bath of anti-itch products like *Pinetarsol* will give even greater relief.

Traditionally, calamine lotion has been used to soothe the itch of chickenpox. Local anaesthetic preparations such as *Ego Soov* will also provide comfort. Applications of products like *Solugel* prevent the chickenpox spots drying out and minimise the possibility of scarring.

Antihistamines taken orally, particularly the sedating antihistamines such as *Polaramine* or *Phenergan*, will also give extra relief from the annoying itch.

Of course chickenpox does not only occur in children. Adults who get chickenpox usually have quite severe cases with major discomfort and possibly pneumonia. Chickenpox in pregnancy can cause serious complications.

Natural infection with chickenpox appears to convey lifelong immunity and a second infection is rare. However, after a chickenpox infection the virus does remain within the nervous system in the body and may be re-activated later in the form of shingles.

There is now an effective vaccine for the prevention of chickenpox. It is not yet subsidised by the government and costs around \$60. Children from nine months to 12 years of age need just a single dose, while older children and adults require two doses at least six weeks apart.