



City of Chicago
Brandon Johnson, Mayor



Health Alert

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Chicago Department of Public Health
Olusimbo Ige MD, MPH, Commissioner

VARICELLA IN YOUTH SETTINGS

December 15, 2023

Summary and Action Items

- The Chicago Department of Public Health has seen an increase in chickenpox (varicella) cases, especially in the last four weeks.
- Most cases have been in people newly arrived from the U.S. southern border living in shelters.
- Schools should ensure incoming students are vaccinated against chickenpox according to the IDPH minimum immunization requirements for schools.
- Schools are required to report all confirmed chickenpox cases to the Chicago Department of Public Health within 24 hours.

Background: The Chicago Department of Public Health has identified nearly 400 cases of chickenpox among Chicago residents since January 1, 2023. Most reported cases have been in people who recently arrived from the U.S. Southern Border and are currently living in shelters, and many have been in school-aged children. Chickenpox is highly contagious and can spread quickly among unvaccinated populations. While most chickenpox infections are mild, chickenpox can be serious, even life-threatening, especially in babies, adolescents, adults, people who are pregnant, and people with weakened immune systems. It is important to note that due to high vaccination coverage, vaccine-preventable diseases like measles, mumps, rubella, polio, and varicella (chicken pox) are rare in the U.S. and most Chicagoans are protected through routine childhood vaccinations or in some cases through childhood infections.

Symptoms: Chickenpox can cause an itchy, blister-like rash. The rash first appears as red spots on the chest, back, and face, then spreads over the body. The red spots will turn into fluid-filled blisters that then scab over. A person may also develop a fever, tiredness, headache, and loss of appetite. Chickenpox usually lasts 4 to 7 days. People with chickenpox usually develop symptoms 14 to 16 days (range of 10 to 21 days) after they have been exposed.

Infection Control: If one person has a chickenpox infection, up to 90% of the people close to that person who are **not immune** will also become infected.

- **Isolation:** Anyone diagnosed with chickenpox must be excluded from school until all lesions have crusted AND at least 5 days have passed since the rash began. Vaccinated children with chickenpox must be excluded until fever-free and no new lesions have developed for at least 24 hours. A person with chickenpox is considered contagious 1 to 2 days before the rash begins and until all the chickenpox lesions have scabbed over and no new lesions are forming.

- **Transmission:** Chickenpox is mainly spread through close contact with someone who has it. Chickenpox can spread through direct contact with the chickenpox lesions or fluid from the lesions as well as contact with nasal secretions from an infected person. It can also spread through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes.
- **Vaccination:** Vaccination is the best way to prevent chickenpox. Two doses of the chickenpox vaccine are recommended by the CDC with the first dose given between 12–15 months and the second dose between 4–6 years old. Per Illinois Administrative Code, children in childcare and preschool are required to have one dose of the chickenpox vaccine on or after their first birthday. Children in Kindergarten or older are required to have two doses of chickenpox vaccine with the first given on or after their first birthday and the second dose no less than 28 days later.

Required: Reporting: Per Illinois Administrative Code, schools must report cases of chickenpox to CDPH within 24 hours. For single cases of chickenpox, complete this [RedCap Form](#) (preferred) or call the CDPH Disease Reporting Line at 312-743-9000 and follow the prompts to report a case or to report multiple cases, call the CDPH Disease Reporting Line at 312-743-9000.

What Public Health is doing: The Chicago Department of Public Health is monitoring the situation and advising schools on next steps. After reporting a case of chickenpox to CDPH, we will:

- Provide a notification letter to send to parents/guardians.
- Confirm when those diagnosed with chickenpox can return to school.
- Assist in reviewing vaccination records of close contacts and determine if any close contacts need to be excluded from school.
- Advise on next steps for any immunocompromised students or staff exposed to chickenpox.

Additional Resources:

- [CDC Chickenpox](#)
- [CDPH – HAN Chickenpox in Schools](#)