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Chickenpox

Varicella or chicken pox is a very common viral infection. It is seen through out the year but it is more common when the temperature soars.

Chicken pox is a disease caused due to the infection of Varicella Zoster virus (herpes virus 3). It is a highly contagious viral disease that is spread by direct contact or breathing in germs from an infected person.

About two weeks after exposure, patient develops fever, body pain, head ache, running nose and then chicken pox spots appear on the body. Skin rashes appear first on the trunk and face then spread all over the body. Rashes look like small pimples first and then turn to form vesicles.

Varicella is generally a disease of childhood. It is a relatively mild disease in children. Complications of diseases like bacterial infection of the skin, pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, meningitis, encephalitis (swelling of brain) etc are more common in adults. in children with fever, aspirin should not be given to reduce the temperature. The use of aspirin in children with chicken pox has been associated with development of Reye's syndrome (a severe disease affecting all organs, but most seriously affecting the liver and brain) and may cause death.

Herpes zoster or Shingles is a late complication of chicken pox. The virus which caused chicken pox remains inside the body for several years and comes out through a nerve on one side of the body. So the patient will get eruptions in a line along the course of the nerve. It is a very painful condition.

Isolation of the patient is essential till the primary crusts have disappeared. Bed rest is needed. The chicken pox scabs are not infective. In severe cases patient may need hospitalization and intravenous therapy.

Apart from symptomatic treatment for fever, body pain and itching; patients are advised to take oatmeal baths every day.

Up to a few years back, it was considered as a disease with out definite treatment or preventive injections. Now we have very effective antiviral medicines for this condition. If the medicine is given during the early stage of the disease, the disease will be very mild and all the complications can be prevented.

Vaccination is the best way of prevention of the disease. It is recommended to all children over twelve months of age who have not had clinically detectable chicken pox. 10% of adults remain susceptible to varicella. Two percentage of all cases of varicella occurs in adults but almost 50% of all deaths are in the adult population. So, susceptible adolescents and adults should be vaccinated.

Administration of vaccine to susceptible healthy persons within 72 hours and possibly up to 120 hours after varicella exposure may prevent or significantly reduce the severity of the disease. The protective efficiency of the vaccine is 90% when a vaccination is taken within 3 days of exposure to chicken pox patient.

In 2006 F.D.A. has approved Zostavax for prevention of shingles (herpes zoster). Zostavax is a more concentrated formulation of chicken pox vaccine designed to elicit an immune response in elderly patients whose immunity against this virus wanes with advancing age.

Chicken pox during pregnancy

Once infection with chicken pox gives immunity from the infection.

However for those not immune to chicken pox and those who come in contact with it during pregnancy, injection varicella zoster immune globulin is given.

Those who have never had chickenpox, or are not sure, must see your doctor as soon as possible and have a blood test to find out the status whether immune or not. During pregnancy any appearance of rash should be immediately brought to the notice of a Doctor.

Those who are not immune to chickenpox and come into contact with it during pregnancy must be given an injection of varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG). This is a human blood product which strengthens the immune system for a short time but does not necessarily prevent chickenpox developing. VZIG can make the infection milder and not last for as long. The injection can be given for up to 10 days after contact with chickenpox and before any of the symptoms appear. VZIG does not work once blisters erupt.

A second dose of VZIG should be given if there is any contact with chickenpox again and it is 3 weeks or longer since the last injection.

Risk's to the fetus

- Only a very small number of women (3 in every 1000 or 0.3%) catch chickenpox in pregnancy. Even fewer babies are affected in the uterus. The risk of a baby catching chickenpox depends on what stage in pregnancy you catch it.

- During the course of pregnancy
up to 28 weeks of pregnancy

There is no evidence that an increased risk of early miscarriage because of chickenpox. Damage can occur to the eyes, legs, arms, brain, bladder or bowel in 1-2 of every 100 babies (1-2%). A fetal medicine specialist with the help ultrasound scans can discuss about possible tests and their risks.

between 28 and 36 weeks of pregnancy

The virus stays in the baby's body but will not cause any symptoms. The virus may become active again causing shingles in the first few years of the child's life.

after 36 weeks and to birth

The baby may become infected and could be born with chickenpox.

around the time of birth

If the baby is born within 7 days of mothers infection with chickenpox rash appearing, the baby may get severe chickenpox. The baby will be treated.

up to 7 days after birth

The baby may get severe chickenpox and will be treated. The baby will be monitored for 28 days after you became infected.

It is safe to breastfeed with or without the infection of chickenpox during pregnancy.

After birth, the baby will have an eye examination and blood tests. When the baby is 7 months of age, a blood test can check if the baby has antibodies (immunity) to chickenpox. The test can also show if the baby caught chickenpox before birth.

Chickenpox in pregnancy or when trying to become pregnant, one should avoid contact with other pregnant mothers and new babies until all the blisters have crusted over.

Treatment

An antiviral drug called Aciclovir to be given within 24 hours of the chickenpox rash appearing. This will reduce fever and symptoms. Aciclovir is only recommended for more than 20 weeks pregnant. No medication during pregnancy is without

its risks .Once infection with chickenpox, is contracted there is no treatment that can prevent baby from getting chickenpox in the uterus.

Chickenpox can be serious for health during pregnancy. Complications can occur such as chest infection (pneumonia), inflammation of the liver (hepatitis) and inflammation of the brain (encephalitis).Very rarely, women can die from complications.

A greater risk of complications exists for infection with chickenpox during pregnancy for those who:

- smoke cigarettes
- have a lung disease such as bronchitis or emphysema
- are taking steroids or have done so in the last 3 months
- are more than 20 weeks of pregnancy

If any of these apply to you, you may need to be referred to the hospital.

The following symptoms with chicken pox during pregnancy should be treated in a hospital:

- chest and breathing problems
- headache, drowsiness, vomiting or feeling sick
- vaginal bleeding
- a rash that is bleeding
- a severe rash
- if mother's immunity is suppressed (mother's immune system is not working as it should be).

These symptoms may be a sign that the complications of chickenpox developing.

If the mother needs to be admitted to hospital, nursing will be done in a side room away from babies and pregnant women.

The timing of delivery will depend on individual circumstances. It is best to wait until the chickenpox is over, to recover. This will also give a chance for the immunity to pass to the baby. If you are very ill with chickenpox, particularly with any of the complications, your obstetrician will discuss whether you should have the baby early.

If the newborn baby has come into contact with chickenpox in the first 7 days of life and if the mother is immune, then the baby will be protected by mother's immunity and there is nothing to worry about.

If mother is not immune, then the baby may be given VZIG.

Shingles during pregnancy:

If immune to chickenpox there is no need to worry. If not immune, then the risk of getting chickenpox from someone with shingles present on a covered part of the body, is very small. If the shingles is widespread or exposed (such as the face or eye) there is a risk of spread of chickenpox infection when the blisters are active and until they are crusted over. See the doctor for advice about treatment.

If infected with shingles during pregnancy, it is usually mild and there is no risk for the mother or the baby.